



Mapping:

The Trash-Tier Skill

✕ That Got Me Into a

Top-Tier Party

Ill. Hitomi Shizuki

8

Udon Kamono





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Another Terrible Combination

Fame, fortune, magic, wisdom... Endless treasure and bounty lay within the otherworldly depths of the land—depths yet to be conquered that beckon people with the intangible power of curiosity. Be it in the name of hopes and dreams or greed and self-interest, adventurers from all walks of life risked everything to challenge the dungeons.

One of many daring parties was the Arrivers. We'd disbanded for a time after losing one of our own, but we'd since come together again, bolstered our ranks, and resumed dungeon diving. We'd now made it through floor 21, the fateful floor that had stolen Jin from us, and we were finally ready to press further into the dungeon. Normally this would be where things went wrong, but...

"All right! Just a little more to go!"

Surprisingly, we were making smooth progress without any complications.

At present, we'd made it to the end of floor 22. The floor 21 boss was a demon with a magic sword that sealed the holy arts used by priests and paladins, but floor 22 was guarded by a ghost wielding a magic spear with an annoying hit-and-run fighting style. It spent most of its time incorporeal, meaning our physical attacks had no effect on it, and it would only materialize to strike back at us. Its magic spear would multiply for a ranged area attack, raining down countless copies of itself from overhead or stabbing up through the ground below.

While we could use holy arts freely on this floor, this particular attack put our rearline fighters at risk. Yet in spite of that, the MVP of this battle was proving to be our mage, Erin. She was blocking the magic spear's assault with protective area-wide spells while simultaneously whittling away at the boss with attack spells. She was basically our first line of defense *and* offense. We'd gathered intel on floor 22 from other dungeon parties who'd cleared it before us, but even so, having a mage with us that could prepare any magic she needed on short notice guaranteed we'd be prepared. That said, the person helping her

maximize her potential was the newest of the Arrivers, Sofie.

“Erin! Another rain of spears is coming!”

“On it!”

Erin conjured a magic circle in the air above her, forming a barrier. Spears clad in a bluish-white aura plunged down into it, but couldn’t breach it.

Sofie had a skill called High Appraisal that allowed her to perceive the powers of items, people, and monsters just by looking at them. Thanks to her, we were always able to stay abreast of our enemies’ strategies. It was especially helpful against particularly dangerous gimmicks, like the sealing of holy arts or these super wide-range magic spear attacks. Even though we always scouted what information we could beforehand, there was no way to tell what surprises might lie on any given floor. Being able to analyze our enemies in the heat of battle and react accordingly was a huge boon. Once we hit unknown territory in the dungeon, there wouldn’t *be* anyone to gather intel from; we’d be completely reliant on Sofie then. Perhaps it was a stroke of luck that we’d gotten her from Leyfa.

“Protection!” Roslia called, using a defensive art on herself.

“An attack like that’ll never hit me!” Force shouted at the same time, using his Mind’s Eye skill to sidestep the falling spears.

The two of them, our paladin and swordsman, were naturally in the fray. Roslia’s Holy Sword Fractus was still effective against the boss in its ghost form—something we’d learned thanks to Sofie’s skill. She really was amazing.

While the rest of us held out against the rain of spears, our two sword-wielders pressed their offensive. The boss was clearly on its last legs. When Erin struck it with her next spell, powered by Neme’s buff, it did the ghost in for good. Its large, looming figure glowed faintly before fading away entirely.

Since the boss wasn’t a melee opponent and had simply relied on the same wide-range attack over and over again, we hadn’t needed a decoy this time. Basically, I’d done nothing this entire boss fight. I figured I could at least use my Enemy Search to let everyone know when the boss was gone for sure, but...

“The boss is no more. It’s safe to relax now.”

Even that job was stolen from me by Sofie. Did the Arrivers really need me...?

*

After clearing floor 22, returning to HQ, and cleaning up, the six of us gathered in the living room like always. Since we'd handled the boss fight without issue, our post-expedition evaluation was more like a casual chat.

"Well, things went smoothly this time," said Erin. She'd done the most damage to the boss by far yet didn't seem to realize it. She was completely nonchalant, although she'd apparently been thinking the same thing I was. "I have to say...Sofie's skill is really useful. Knowing everything about the enemy is great."

"You think so?" Sofie cocked her head. "I believe you're the amazing one, Erin. You can use any type of magic, and you never run out of mana."

"Maybe, but you should take a compliment when you get one."

"I wish I could've gotten flashy skills like yours..."

Too bad the two of them weren't on the same page at all. Sofie was naturally negative, and Erin wasn't familiar with the concept of humility.

"Next up is floor 23!" Neme practically cheered. This enthusiastic dwarf girl looked young, but she was actually the oldest one here. Her demeanor belied her real age, so she came across every bit as childish as she looked.

"Best get to reconnaissance, then," Force said, folding his arms. He'd nearly been seduced away by a certain partywrecker once, but he'd since come into his own as the leader of the Arrivers.

Said certain partywrecker piped up to ask, "We got our floor 22 intel from the Labyrinth Knights, but they're still in the middle of clearing floor 23, right?"

"According to word on the street, yeah."

"That means they don't have information about the boss yet, I guess..."

"True. The only party that's cleared floor 23 is Liberation."

There were currently four leading parties in the Puriff dungeon scene. Liberation was said to be the most knowledgeable and experienced of the lot.

They'd even been in dungeons abroad before. Meanwhile, the Labyrinth Knights were the biggest party in town. I assisted their second-string team as a Mapping navigator in exchange for information from time to time. Aside from the two of them, there was also the Princess's Legion, which was headed by the Tyrant Princess herself—Sofie's former master, Leyfa Southerndall. And then there was us, the Arrivers.

"But we don't have any connections with Liberation. What'll we do?" Roslia asked.

"I can get general information about the floor from the Labyrinth Knights, but we'll still need intel on the boss..." I bemoaned.

"Liberation's kind of a mystery, though. They've been set up in town for years, but I rarely see 'em. Jin was acquainted with them, but..." Force sighed.

"They're barely ever at their base. It's like they're always in the dungeon," Erin added.

"In that case, shall we give up on getting information from them and try the floor with whatever we can learn from the Labyrinth Knights? The further we go into the dungeon, the less intel there's going to be anyway," our party leader suggested.

"Sounds good to me," I agreed.

There was no guarantee that Liberation would tell us what we wanted to know in the first place, and we now had Sofie and High Appraisal on our side. It was unlikely we'd find ourselves in another deadly situation like our introduction to floor 21, so this was as good an opportunity as any to test ourselves against the unknown.

"We'll be counting on you for the Labyrinth Knights' intel, Note," Force said.

"Got it."

"Then I shall report to Princess Leyfa about floor 22," Sofie declared.

"Oh yeah, I'd almost forgotten that was a thing."

At present, the Arrivers had developed something of an alliance with the Princess's Legion. We'd been at odds before, butting heads to the point of

kidnapping party members and hiring assassins, but we'd since settled into a friendly relationship after our joint battle on floor 21. It was all thanks to Sofie's years of service to Leyfa...and the Tyrant Princess mellowing out some.

"Thanks for doing that, Sofie," I said.

I thought it'd be for the best if we stayed on Leyfa's good side. She was one dangerous person to cross. But just as I was thinking how nice it was to finally be on friendly terms with her...

"So you're going to see the princess?" Erin asked.

"Yes, that's the plan," Sofie informed her.

"Then I'll go with you," Erin declared.

"What for?!" I yelled in spite of myself.

The one person who could jeopardize everything we'd worked toward with the princess wanted to go see her. I didn't know what Erin thought she was doing, but I sure wished she wouldn't...

"Oh, I just wanted to have a little chat," she insisted.

"Can you refrain from random acts of violence?"

"What are you talking about?! Is it really so unbelievable that I just want to go talk to someone?!"

"Well, sort of..."

Talk about an absolute lack of self-awareness. Erin would pick a fight with just about anyone.

"What exactly do you plan on saying to Princess Leyfa?" I asked.

"Leyfa? I don't have anything to say to her."

"Then why are you going?!"

"It's not for her... I want to talk to your childhood friend."

"Huh...?"

"I want to know what kind of person your first love was, and I might as well give her a piece of my mind while I'm at it."

I was dumbstruck. I was convinced that Erin and Miya should never be allowed to meet, so I'd specifically avoided letting that happen to the best of my ability—and now here Erin was, throwing all that work out the window. Her bullheadedness was greater than I ever imagined. I almost would've preferred her going to see Leyfa.

"Don't worry, Note!" she pronounced. "I'll avenge you by beating her to a pulp!"

"That's not what I want! If you're really doing this for me, then don't do it at all!"

"I get it. No matter how much you hate her, it's hard to exact payback on people you used to have feelings for. But don't you worry. I'm taking the initiative all on my own."

"Could you please listen to me for once?" I nearly clutched my head, wishing someone would stop Erin for me. "Come on, Sofie, you say something too. Surely you don't want to take this loose cannon with you either, right?"

"I hate Miya Line, so I support Erin's decision."

"I forgot you were anti-Miya too..."

Sofie had been expelled from Leyfa's party after being defeated by Miya—but that didn't mean she had to abet Erin here! I let out a heavy sigh, lamenting the tragedy that was about to take place.

*

The day after, I—Erin Fortlord—informed Note that I was going to see Miya Line. I set out for the hotel with Sofie in tow. We entered the lobby and were allowed up using Sofie's name. Once we arrived on the floor the Princess's Legion had rented out, Sofie stopped and knocked on a particular door. Apparently this was the room the princess was staying in.

"Hey, you're Sofie, right? And you're..."

A half-elf girl with refined features appeared in the doorway. Her blonde hair gleamed. Her eyes were clear and her skin was smooth. She had a svelte but shapely figure. This was Note's childhood friend...and first love. To put it simply,

she was beautiful. Much more than me. It was no wonder Note had fallen for her.

Wait, this isn't good... I can't let myself get weak-kneed! She's the treacherous wench who betrayed Note! I have to give her her comeuppance on his behalf, since he's too nice to do it himself!

"I'm the Arrivers' mage, E—"

"Eri, right?"

"No!" She immediately took the wind out of my sails, nearly knocking me onto the floor. "You left off the N! It's Erin! Erin Fortlord!"

"Oh, right, right. My bad, ha ha..."

"Urgh..."

I clenched my fists in rage. Was I *that* unimportant to her?

It's not like we've never met before! I saved you on floor 21, didn't I?! Even if we never spoke directly, you could at least remember my name! I remembered yours!

"So, you're Mila, right?"

"That's not her name, Erin," interjected Sofie. "It's Miya. You knew that earlier, so why are you forgetting it now?"

"That was intentional! Why would you tell her that I knew her name?!"

I'd said the wrong name purposefully out of spite, yet Sofie had to go and expose me. Why was it so hard for me to get through to this girl?

"Oh, Erin, you're hilarious!"

What are you laughing for, Miya? I'm not joking around here!

"Let's be friends," the half-elf said, approaching me and shaking my hand.

The suddenness of it all and her intense gaze made me shrink back. "Y-Yeah... Let's be friends..."

Wait, what am I saying?! Why am I shaking hands with my archenemy?!

I could only imagine that this was how she'd gotten her claws in Note too.

Sidling up to him and then putting her hands on him... How wily. For the time being, I decided to squeeze her hand—hard—to show her how I really felt. But...

Huh?

I couldn't squeeze her at all! I mean, sure, I didn't have much grip strength to begin with, but Miya's hand was like a rock. In fact, she was the one squeezing me right now as she violently shook my arm up and down.

Stop already! You're gonna dislocate my shoulder!

I somehow managed to disengage from her death roll of a handshake and rub my shoulder. "That's not what I'm here for!" I said. "I came to talk to you!"

"Really? I've been dying to talk to you too!"

"Don't lie to me! You didn't even know my name!"

"Aw, you really are funny, Erin!"

I wasn't trying to be a comedian here, but Miya was cracking up. What was with this girl? She was so airheaded. It was like she wasn't hearing a word I said.

"Sofie, you've got something to say to Miya too, right? Let her have it," I whispered into Sofie's ear.

But as soon as I did that, a voice called from the other side of the door, "Is that you, Sofie? Come in already."

"Yes, Your Highness!"

"Wait, Sofie!" I shouted after her. "What about Miya? Weren't you going to help me?"

"I don't care. Princess Leyfa is more important."

"Don't abandon me!"

Sofie made a beeline for Leyfa, leaving me alone with Miya.

What am I supposed to do? Can I just go home? No, I can't let things end like this...

I wasn't about to leave with my tail between my legs. Situations like this

called for confidence, even if it was just a bluff.

“Fine,” I huffed. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

I didn’t care if she was Note’s childhood friend or first love; I wasn’t about to lose to this puny half-elf. I’d beat her down so bad that she’d never try to approach him again. I had my hands full with Roslia as it was. I didn’t want to deal with any more rivals.

“Are Note and Roslia actually dating?” she asked.

“...Wuh?”

Seriously, what? Why would you ask me that? Why would you assume Roslia was his girlfriend and not me? I mean, not that I’m really his girlfriend...

“Note and Roslia were together in the capital, and they always seemed like they were close. They deny it though, so I’ve been wondering what the real story is.”

“No. They’re not dating.”

“I see.”

“What do you care?”

“Oh, I’m just concerned as his childhood friend. It’s not like I’m interested in him myself or anything. He’s unreliable and lame. I wouldn’t even consider him boyfriend material, although I guess he was kinda cool when he came to save me... But I mean that as a friend!”

“I see.”

That was a relief. I’d been worried Miya had feelings for Note, but if she only saw him as a friend, then it wasn’t a problem. She’d point-blank said he wasn’t boyfriend material, meaning I could safely count her off my list of rivals.

Phew...

I suddenly recalled my little sister Marin telling me not to take everything people said at face value, but I couldn’t help feeling that was irrelevant right now.

“So, what gives?” I asked. “You sound like you’re opposed to Note and Roslia

getting together.”

“I’m not one to talk, but Roslia has an awful personality. She’s always picking on me, yet she acts all cute and innocent in front of Note.”

“I know. I wish she’d learn to keep her hands to herself too.”

“Right?!”

“Well, I have spent a *lot* of time with them.”

“Oh my gosh! Same! I’m so glad I got to talk to you!”

I had no idea why the girl I wanted to sock so bad was now shaking my hand again—every bit as furiously as before.

Knock it off! That really hurts! Ow, my shoulder!

“I dunno why, but Note seems to be a magnet for trouble like her.”

“You’re telling me.”

“He’s always been like that. Maybe it’s because he seems like such an easy mark... Or maybe it’s just because he’s so weak to women. He’s simple like that.”

“Really?”

“Really. We grew up together in the same little village, but he’d get all flustered whenever we made eye contact. If I tried to touch him, he’d turn bright red.”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

“Isn’t that hilarious?” she continued. “We’ve known each other all our lives, so it’s not like he has anything to be self-conscious about. Get this! We used to sleep over at each other’s houses all the time, but he’d always insist on sleeping in different beds.”

“...Wuh?”

I couldn’t believe Miya. She was just going on and on about her relationship with Note. Was she trying to rile me up? It was like she was lording being his childhood friend over me. What a totally unfair advantage!

Sure, maybe I don't know what Note was like in the past! But I've spent plenty of time with him in the present to make up for it, okay?!

"Well, you know, I spent two months on floor 20 with him!" I blurted out.

"That must've been terrible..."

Wait, why was she looking at me with pity in her eyes all of a sudden? I looked back on those days fondly, so I thought for sure she'd be jealous... Why didn't she care?

"Being trapped in the dungeon for two months couldn't have been easy. And you were stuck with stupid Note of all people..."

Okay, maybe that hadn't been the best card to play. Who would be envious of getting stranded in the dungeon? I should've told her about how he'd whisked me away from the Seventh Sage Selection in a bridal carry instead... More importantly, however, I had to correct her on something.

"Note's not stupid. He's actually pretty dependable."

"Really?"

"Yup. We only survived on floor 20 thanks to him... If anything, I was the one holding him back."

"You're so humble, Erin. I like that."

"Huh?"

I was being totally honest, and yet somehow, Miya had gotten the wrong idea. Me, humble? That was probably the first time in my life I'd ever heard such a thing.

"I think I had the wrong idea about you, Erin."

"How so?"

"I heard Note confessed his love to you at the Seventh Sage Selection, so I thought you were some evil seductress like Roslia. But I was wrong."

"Um..."

"You're modest and have a great personality, and you're mature and interesting to talk to. I've decided I like you."

Wait, what just happened? What's going on? I'm scared! What kind of misunderstanding is this? Who is she even talking about?!

"Say, Erin, let's be friends."

"Bwuh?!"

Is she obtuse? Just plain dumb? Why would she want to be friends with me? I was only trying to shoo her away from Note like some pest. How did it come to this...?

"What do you say?" she pressed me. "I'm still kinda new in town, so I don't have many friends yet. I'd love to count you among them."

"Uhhh..."

I didn't have many friends either. Or any, for that matter. So I could understand wanting to escape the loneliness of being friendless. I knew how hard it was to get by in a town of strangers. I wanted to make more friends myself, but this wasn't how I'd imagined it happening. I wasn't anywhere near as elated as I thought I'd be. I wasn't interested in playing along with anyone's stupid game—Miya's least of all. She had no idea who she was dealing with here, and I wished she'd take a hint.

"Please say yes, Erin! Think of it as doing me a favor!"

Dewy eyes peered at me. Why was she so pretty? When she looked at me like that, I didn't have the heart to turn her down... I'd be the villain for picking a fight at this point!

"Y-Yeah, o-okay."

Before I knew it, I was nodding. *What am I doing...?*

"Thank you! I'm a little curious why you sound so unsure, but I just knew you were nice, Erin!"

As Miya shook my hand furiously again, I soullessly stared into the distance.



“Welcome home. How did things go with Miya? About as terrible as I predicted?” Note asked.

When Sofie and I returned to HQ, he approached me hesitantly. I turned to him, utterly exhausted.

“We’re friends now...”

“How’d that happen?!”

That’s what I want to know. Seriously, what am I supposed to do? Will someone save me?

Magic Bullet Barrage

After clearing floor 22 and spending some time preparing for our next expedition, the Arrivers were straight back in the dungeon. We took the warp crystal to floor 23 where we were greeted by a vast wasteland vista. The sky overhead was painted a bloody red, and parched earth spread as far as the eye could see underfoot. Below the elevated platform we came in on was a maze of dilapidated buildings. On the other side stood a tower—far enough away that it looked as thin as a needle, but it was still tall enough to be visible.

As I took in the scenery, I recalled what we'd learned from Labyrinth Knights about this floor... In short, it was a death trap.

"Force?"

"On it. I'll test the waters, just like we talked about."

With that, Force left the safe zone around the warp crystal. He took one step, then two, three... He walked a short ways, yet nothing happened. Or so it seemed, but just then, there was a glint of light from the top of the tower. The next moment, Force drew his sword. A shock wave rumbled through the air.

"Ugh!"

Sparks flew from the tip of his blade as though he'd just blocked something with it. When Force finished his swing, a small lump of metal fell to the ground.

"I know we were warned about this in advance, but blocking every one of those is gonna be a pain," he grumbled.

This was why I'd said floor 23 was a death trap. We were getting sniped at. The shooter was probably the boss at the top of the tower, and it would keep firing as we explored the floor. Force was able to block this first round thanks to Mind's Eye, but a single shot from a magical bullet would be fatal. And we'd be fending those off *while* dealing with the other monsters on the floor, so we had to be especially careful. Like floor 21 and floor 22, this floor was rather nasty by design.

“Not being able to retaliate is infuriating. I wonder if we can hit it from here,” Erin mused.

She gathered magical energy within the safe zone, then stepped out to cast her spell. A fiery bird appeared from the end of her staff, blazing through the sky in an arc before hitting a semiopaque barrier and dispersing.

“It’s within range, but nothing’s getting through. We’ll have to cross that barrier first,” she reported.

“Figures,” I sighed.

The Labyrinth Knights had warned us of that much already, but it was still worth testing to see for ourselves. After finishing her spell, Erin returned to the safe zone.

We spent a little more time experimenting and learned that the boss had a reload time between shots of roughly five minutes. That checked out against what the Labyrinth Knights had told us. Not even floor 23 was brutal enough to hail sniper fire every second.

When the next bullet came right on cue, Force deflected it again.

“How is it?” I asked.

“They’re not impossible to block. The more my eyes get accustomed to it, the easier it’ll be.”

“That’s great.”

“Can I practice with another shot or two?”

“Of course.”

After losing Jin, Force had grown a lot more cautious in the dungeon. For the better, if you asked me. While he was waiting for the boss to fire again, Sofie reached out of the safe zone and picked up one of the bullets Force had cut out of the air.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I was just using High Appraisal on it.”

“Find out anything?”

“A little something. There’s a curse on this ammunition. It’s not like the enemies of floor 21 who would inflict wounds that couldn’t be healed with holy arts, but injuries caused by these bullets *will* be difficult to heal. Be careful.”

“You mean Neme won’t get a chance to shine?!”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Nooo...”

Neme was clearly disappointed. I hadn’t had much of a chance to shine on floor 22 the other day myself, so I knew how she felt. Actually, when I stopped to think about it, Neme hadn’t had much of a chance to shine at all since we’d hit the end floors. Not that it was her fault. It was more like the dungeon had grown wise to holy arts. Floor 21 completely nullified them. Floor 22 made it hard for any rearline role. And now floor 23’s main opponent was a sniper trying to pick off the weakest targets. Did the dungeon have it out for priestesses? Whoever’d made it really had a nasty streak.

Ten minutes and two shots later, Force returned to the safe zone.

“I’m ready now,” he reported. “You’re up next, Roslia.”

“I’ll be off, then!” she replied, stepping out of the barrier in his stead.

Under constant fire while exploring the floor, our first line of defense would be Force with Roslia as backup. Force had his Mind’s Eye skill that allowed him to see incoming attacks, and Roslia had Guide of the Holy Sword that allowed her to see the best way to attack with Fractus—including cutting down bullets. If she didn’t make it in time with her sword, she also had Impenetrable Fortress to block the shot.

Meanwhile, our tank, Sofie, was off of sniper duty. She could easily take a bullet with her defensive abilities, but she had no skills or arts to detect incoming attacks. So rather than the sniper, she’d be responsible for handling any monsters that came at us on the ground—a plenty big job in and of itself.

“Hmm... I think I’m good too.”

Like Force, Roslia returned to the barrier after blocking a handful of shots. Unlike him, her Holy Sword Fractus burned the magic bullets into ash, so she

had almost nothing to worry about.

“The next test is to see what happens when it targets someone else.”

Since we hadn’t encountered any issues so far, we were going to keep up our series of experiments. Even if Force and Roslia could stop fire headed their way, this would all be for naught if they couldn’t protect anyone else. Sofie could handle herself, but the rest of us could easily wind up dead.

“So, who’s going to be bait first?” Roslia asked.

Neme, Erin, and I all exchanged looks, silently asking each other who should go.

“Come on, Erin,” Roslia cooed.

“Why me?!” she shrieked in protest.

“Oh, you know. I’d totally be willing to risk my life for a friend like you and all...”

“Since when are we friends?! We fight more than we get along! You picked me because you want to see me dead, don’t you?!”

“Excuse me! We’re fellow party members, are we not? I don’t want to see anyone on this team dead! Apologize!”

“Oh... Yeah, you’re right. Sorry.”

“I only chose you because I thought you’d have the funniest reaction to getting shot at.”

“What did I just apologize for?!” Erin yelled, red in the face.

“That’s exactly the kind of reaction that makes Roslia want to tease you, you know?” Force grumbled.

*

“Get down, Erin!” Force shouted.

He then deflected a sniper shot headed straight for her. Meanwhile, the surrounding monsters leveled their guns at us.

“Impenetrable Fortress!”

Just as Roslia put up her barrier, the mechanical soldiers we were facing all attacked at once. The deafening roar of gunfire came at us from every direction, but the bullets failed to reach us thanks to Roslia's defensive spell.

"I can't keep this up for long! What should we do?" she asked.

The monsters on this floor were different from any other. They were mostly mechanical soldiers made of metal plates and springs, and they wielded firearms just like the boss in the tower. Some specialized in medium range combat with assault rifles and shotguns, while some hid in the shadows of the ruins with sniper rifles, and others yet attacked openly with machine guns and cannons. Though their strategies differed, they were all relatively easy to defeat at close range.

The hitch was that there were so many of them firing at once that getting close was nearly impossible. And when Erin tried to sling spells from a distance, a similar barrier like the one we saw around the tower appeared to protect the soldiers. You could say this floor bore the closest resemblance to 16 with its horseman army, but the mobs here were a lot stronger and a lot more annoying with their coordinated teamwork.

"Should I go on the offense instead now?" Force asked.

"No, you prepare for the next sniper shot," Sofie replied. "I'll move to the front line instead."

"Can you make do on your own?"

"I cannot. May I bring Roslia?"

"Me? What about our defenses?"

"Get Erin to cast something. Her attacks are being blocked anyway."

"Hey, that makes me sound useless!" Erin shouted. "It's not my fault the enemies have protection against magic!"

"I wasn't implying that. We're going to aim for the enemies putting up the barriers first, so please switch to attacking once we take care of them."

"Fine."

"My Impenetrable Fortress is about to give! We move on the count of three!"

Roslia counted down and her dome of light shattered. When it did, Sofie manipulated the earth beneath us with spirit arts to form a simple wall. It served as a barrier against the barrage of incoming bullets, but it also gave Roslia and Sofie a push. The two of them burst forward together as Erin cast a defense spell to shield us from more fire.

“Roslia, the soldiers holding those long devices in the left and right corners are the ones controlling the magic barrier.”

“I’ll take the left. The right’s all yours, Sofie.”

“Understood.”

With High Appraisal, Sofie could identify the mechanical soldiers’ various roles. She split ways with Roslia, creating more earthen walls to defend her as she closed in on her target. Roslia did the same with the paladin spell Light Chariot.

“Erin, there are enemies approaching from the side,” I informed her. “Can you handle them?”

“No freaking way! I can’t cast two spells at once, and if I drop this one, we’ll all be in the line of fire!”

“I’ll go instead, then,” our party leader offered.

“Force!” Neme called after him.

“I know,” he replied. “How long until the boss fires again?”

“Three minutes and twenty seconds.”

“I’ll be back in two.”

For a priestess who relied on regenerative and buff spells, time management was a vital ability. It was hard to say Neme had full mastery of it before, but she’d grown during her days with the Ultimate Invincible Partyz. We could now rely on her to time both her buff spells and the sniper shots.

“Here I go!”

Force dashed out from the cover of Erin’s spell. He had no difficulty making his way through the rain of gunfire with Mind’s Eye. He deflected bullet after

bullet with his near-supernatural swordsmanship, closing in on the soldiers hidden in the shadows.

The enemy's front line was falling apart thanks to Sofie and Roslia's advance. The mechanical soldiers began to retreat toward the back left, but they never stopped shooting.

"We can do this!" Erin shouted while adjusting her barrier to block this new volley of fire. It left our right flank—the side facing the boss tower—completely open.

I was suddenly struck with a terrible feeling.

"Get back here, Force!" I shouted.

"It's only been a minute!" he shouted back.

In that moment, I felt a sharp surge of animosity from the boss. It only fired its magical sniper rounds every five minutes. That was the rule that applied until now. But who said that the sniper could only fire *once* every five minutes?

Force seemed to realize our mistake as well.

"Flash Step!"

He charged back toward us in a straight line, but the boss was faster.

The guardian of this floor was extremely cunning. By restricting its fire to five-minute intervals, it lured dungeoneers into a false sense of security. That left it free to fire a surprise round at the most opportune time. A single sniper shot was deadly enough, and the boss had set a trap to ensure this one would be unblockable.

The bullet flew toward Erin. She didn't even see it coming.

"Please make it...!"

Force thrust his sword out at supersonic speed. A shrill clanging sound exploded right in front of Erin.

"What?!" She whipped around. The magic bullet whizzed past her. Force had somehow managed to spare her the shot—a different target had taken it instead. "Force!"

“Whoa, seriously?” he gasped...for Gleaming Beast was shattered.

In order to protect Erin, he'd extended his sword to deflect the bullet. It had struck his blade dead center. It was just bad luck. Nevertheless, Force deserved a pat on the back for making it in time. We were lucky just to have Erin in one piece still.

Thrown by the momentum of his leap, Force rolled across the ground. All the while, the animosity from the tower remained strong.

“You’ve got to be kidding me...” I muttered.

If there was a second shot, then there could just as easily be a third. Right now, when we'd completely broken formation, would be the perfect time to strike.

“Bloodlust!”

I radiated as much hostility as I could summon, directing it at the tower.

That's it!

The sniper in the distance turned my way with a smile. That was the image that flashed through my mind.

“Shadow Runner!”

No sooner had shadows enshrouded me than the boss fired again. A bullet passed through empty air where my head was mere milliseconds ago. If I'd been the tiniest bit slower, my skull would've been perforated. But I didn't have time to breathe easy just yet.

Please tell me that was the last one...

My hopes were crushed by the animosity still radiating from the tower. The boss was now targeting where I'd land after using Shadow Runner.

“A fourth shot!”

I couldn't change direction mid-leap. The moment my feet touched the ground, I'd be met with a bullet.

Can I evade it somehow? No... I'm only human. I can't simply ignore the laws of physics. But what am I supposed to do, then? Just die?

I couldn't accept that. We were well on our way to conquering the dungeon. I refused to give up the ghost here. I had to think. There had to be a way to survive. I had a fraction of a second before I hit the ground—that was all I had left to come up with a plan and execute it. Before my brain could process anything, I was drawing my dagger.

Are you sure this is the right answer, Note? Can you really do this? This isn't a mistake, is it?

I didn't have time to hesitate. Even if I'd made the wrong choice, the only thing I could do now was follow through.

Hone your eyes. Watch for the right moment.

I stopped blinking so I could keep my eyes glued to the incoming bullet. First, I had to line it up. Then I had to hit it with my blade in a gliding motion. My body would move on its own. All I had to do was watch.

"Now!"

Before I knew it, my right hand swung to deflect the bullet. The numbing impact left me with no sensation in my arm, but I hadn't gone flying. All four of my limbs were still intact too. It was a miracle.

I'd managed to survive by using the thief art Ricochet, but I wouldn't be so lucky the next time. A fifth shot would definitely kill me. My prayers were answered, however, as the animosity coursing from the tower subsided. That multi-shot stunt just now must have been a special move.

"Note, are you okay?!" Force drew his second blade, Purgatory, and skidded along the ground to put himself between me and the tower.

"Yeah, somehow..." I sighed.

The Arrivers were now back in formation. If a fifth round came like this, Force would be able to deflect it.

"What?! What just happened?! All I heard was something explode in front of me, then Note went flying!"

Everything had unfolded too quickly for Erin to keep up. My plan to take the sniper shot myself was a little rash—okay, extremely rash—but it was ultimately

the right call. If the boss had continued to target Erin, she wouldn't have been able to react fast enough.

"Don't let your guard down yet, Note," Force warned.

"I know."

This floor was truly nasty. It was unleashing its next threat on us before we could fully regroup. A tremor rumbled through the earth. Far in the distance, the ground split open as a giant battleship rose into the sky.

"The mid-boss is here!" Neme shouted.

Indeed, this was most likely the mid-boss of floor 23. Mechanical soldiers dropped from the battleship as it sailed toward us.

"What terrible timing..."

The Arrivers were barely together. Force, Erin, Neme, and I had managed to group up again, but Sofie and Roslia were still deep behind enemy lines. We could recall them, but we'd still be under fire from the nearby soldiers.

"Leave this to me!" Erin rallied. She launched a spell from her staff, but just before the flames reached the battleship, they were extinguished by a barely visible barrier. "Not this again!"

As Erin stood there biting her lip in frustration, the battleship turned its mounted machine guns on her.

"Erin!"

"On it!"

She immediately responded with a defense spell to block the incoming spray of machine gun fire, effectively locking her in place. She couldn't do anything else while protecting us like this. We were basically sitting ducks now.

"It's been four and a half minutes since the last sniper shot!" Neme warned us.

Of course. And now it's time for the boss to attack.

It was unclear if the boss would take another five minutes to fire after its four-shot combo, but we had to prepare for it either way. The barrage from the

battleship and Erin's spell were evenly matched. A high-powered round from the tower would be enough to break that stalemate and shatter her barrier. When that happened, we'd all become a giant honeycomb of bullet holes.

So, what? We're screwed now? What do we do? What can we do?

We were taking constant fire from a mid-boss that was invulnerable to magic, mechanical soldiers that were putting midrange pressure on us, and the boss that was sniping at us from a great distance. With all of that working against us, we were slowly being driven into a corner.

"Whoa!"

A purple light trailed through the air. It was the trajectory of a magic bullet—a sight we'd grown quite accustomed to since reaching this floor. It hadn't been five full minutes yet, but the projectile sailed over our heads...

And pierced the flying battleship.

"Huh?!"

The sniper shot hadn't come from the direction of the tower. It had come from behind us—in other words, from the entrance of floor 23.

Each and every one of the Arrivers was astonished by the appearance of a second sniper from the complete opposite direction. As I watched the battleship sinking in the sky, I noticed new presences behind us and grew even more confused.

Marksman of the Holy Gun

Roughly an hour after the giant battleship was shot down, we finally encountered the new presences on floor 23.

“Hmm... Would you folks happen to be the Arrivers?” asked the man standing at the front of a group of six adventurers.

He was tall and slender, wearing a shirt that hung off him loosely. He appeared to be in his late thirties. I couldn't tell if he was tired or if it was just his default expression, but he looked pretty spiritless. On his back, he was carrying a long-barreled firearm that emitted a sinister purple glow. I figured he was probably the second sniper.

He continued, “There's no need to be on guard. We're not here to hurt you. We're dungeon-diving comrades. Let's get along, shall we?”

“So, you guys are...?” Force started to ask.

“Oh, that's right. My bad. Forgot to introduce ourselves,” the man replied, scratching his head. “I'm Diego Brahmandos of Liberation. My hobby is...dungeon exploration, I guess? I don't exactly do anything else. Well, that's basically it.”

Diego extended his hand to a befuddled Force, who shook it.

“I'm Force. The leader of the Arrivers, you could say. It's nice to meet you. Are you your party's leader?”

“Nope. That'd be this fellow here.”

Diego placed his arm around the shoulders of a slighter man standing next to him.

“M-Me?!” The shorter guy flinched.

“Wouldn't you say? You're the one who started this party.”

“All I did was say that I wanted to solve the puzzles of the dungeon! The one who suggested we try tackling it and actually gathered everyone was you,

Diego!”

“But if it weren’t for you, I never would’ve had the idea. So there’s nothing wrong with saying you’re our leader.”

“No thank you! I don’t want such a stressful role.” The shorter guy cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses. “Speaking of which, I haven’t introduced myself. I’m Lou Posti, the crestcaster of this party.”



“Crestcaster?” Erin cocked her head when she heard this.

He clapped his hands together and replied, “That’s right! I’d forgotten that crestcasters are rare in this country. Well, you can think of it as a battle style similar to mage. The way we convert magical energy into spells is the same.”

“Really? So what’s different?”

“Mainly that we use crests as catalysts for spells, I suppose. Drawing them is a step that makes the process more complex than traditional spellcasting, but we’re able to use more sustainable spells because of it. It’s a rearline role that’s more suited for buffs than offense, I’d say.”

“I see. So mages make better attackers.”

Erin, stop trying to make yourself sound good at every opportunity.

“It’s nice to meet you guys. I’m Note Athlon,” I said, introducing myself before asking what had really been on my mind. “So, when you say you want to solve the puzzles of the dungeon, what kind of puzzles are you expecting?”

“The mystery of the dungeons’ very existence—who created them and what purpose they were created for. There’s so much that’s yet unknown.”

“Now that you mention it...”

I’d grown so accustomed to the dungeon that I’d started to think of it as something perfectly ordinary, but in truth, all dungeons were otherworldly. The monsters inside them were far stronger than any on the surface, and the treasures they contained couldn’t be found anywhere else. Their traps and terrain were designed to test those who dared to invade them too. There was purpose to every part of the dungeons, yet they simultaneously made no sense. Any adventurer trying to conquer one could sense it—there was something artificial about dungeons.

“This is just one example, but do you know who’s generally believed to have created the dungeons?” Lou asked.

“That would be God!” Neme replied. She was a devout believer of Cecinaism, the most prevalent religion in our country. This was a common view among its followers.

“That’s right,” said Lou. “And what else in our world do people believe was made by God?”

“Hmm... Neme’s not sure...”

I guess being a believer didn’t mean you knew everything. To be fair, I had no idea what the answer was either.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The divine slates.”

Ah, yeah, that made sense. The one absolute in our world was skills. When you turned fifteen, you received them by offering up a prayer at a divine slate. They existed across the land, yet their origins were unknown. Their supernatural power was such, however, that the prevailing theory was that they were artifacts created by God. In our kingdom, they were mainly managed by the Church of Cecinaism.

“However, if the dungeons and divine slates were made by the same deity, then that gives rise to an inconsistency,” Lou continued.

“How so?”

“There exists something unique to dungeons that’s neither monster nor artifact. Miss Mage, do you know what that is?” Lou asked.

Erin was taken aback. “Huh? Me?!”

He scratched his head and apologized, “Sorry for putting you on the spot. The answer is dungeon script. If you’re a mage aiming to clear the dungeon, you’re familiar with it, no?”

Dungeon script was a special language that appeared in various places throughout the floors. It sometimes provided tips about the current area, and sometimes information about spells or arts. For anyone learning magic, it was key to gaining new knowledge. Of course Erin had studied it.

“What about it, though?” she asked.

“Don’t you think it’s strange? The dungeons and divine slates are said to be created by the same being, so why do they use different languages?”

“Oh!”

That was a good point. The divine slates used a common script, while the dungeon had its own language. If they were created by the same being, then that *was* kind of an inconsistency. Of course, there was a possibility that the text of the slates had been simplified so that everyone could read them, but if God could write in our language, then why use something else in the dungeon?

“So you think the dungeon and divine slates were created by different beings?” I asked.

“Who can say?” Lou responded. “I don’t have enough information to conclude anything right now. It could be that different gods created them, or perhaps that neither are of divine origin in the first place. We won’t know the truth until we reach the end of the dungeon.”

Who made the divine slates...? Honestly speaking, I was more curious about that than who’d created the dungeon. Skills were everything in this world. Receiving a good one could shoot you to the top of the ladder overnight. Conversely, a bad skill could knock you down just as fast. My own life had changed forever with my presentation ceremony. Because of my skill, I was forced to give up on my dream of becoming a great adventurer...until I was picked up by the Arrivers for that very same skill. That was why I no longer resented Mapping, but I still would’ve loved to see the face of the guy who gave it to me.

“Say, why don’t we wrap up the chatter here? It’s almost been five minutes. The next sniper shot is coming,” Diego said, his hands glowing.

“Yes, but you’re the one who’s going to intercept it for us.”

“Even so, you can’t let your guard down. Whenever you start ranting about dungeon mysteries, Lou, you lose sight of your surroundings.”

With that, two guns appeared in Diego’s hands—handguns wreathed with an aura of magical energy. They’d materialized out of nowhere. And no sooner had they appeared than the boss fired from the tower. Before Force or Roslia could draw their swords against the incoming projectile, Diego pulled the trigger. There was an explosion midair. It was the sound of magical bullets meeting.

“Well, I suppose a sniper of this level isn’t worth worrying about,” Diego said, blowing out the smoke rising from the ends of his guns.

When she saw this, Sofie mumbled, “Marksman of the Holy Gun?”

“Ah, so you’ve heard of it before? You’re right on the money. I’ve got Marksman of the Holy Gun, one of the six sacred skills. It’s rarity EX, so it’s considered the strongest of all combat skills. I’m able to explore the dungeon thanks to its legendary power.”

“I’ve never heard of the six sacred skills before...”

“Well, no two people can possess the same EX-rarity skill at once, so decades can go by before a new user inherits it. Not many people know about them.” Diego continued, “The only other confirmed wielder is the inheritor of the holy staff in this kingdom, I suppose. Ah, there were rumors of a princess getting the holy sword in a kingdom to the west— Wait, isn’t that it?” Wide-eyed, Diego was staring at the sword in Roslia’s hand.

“Oh!” Roslia dismissed it like she was trying to hide it, then turned away with a forced smile. “Whatever are you talking about?”

“The fact you can make it appear and disappear at will is proof that it’s a weapon from the sacred skill series...”

“Did I just dig my own grave?!”

“That much was obvious at a glance. Are you the princess?”

“Nope! As far as I’ve heard, the princess is dead. You’ve got the wrong girl.”

“Huh... Right...” Diego fell silent under the mysterious pressure he was feeling.

Well, we’d known Roslia for a long time now and she’d never mentioned anything about being a princess before. Diego really did have the wrong girl. I mean, Roslia couldn’t be a princess. She had royal qualities, sure, but someone of such high status would never join our party. That would’ve been on the same level as Leyfa Southerndall becoming an Arriver—and there was absolutely no way that was happening.



“At any rate,” remarked Diego, “I’m surprised the Arrivers have a sacred skill user too. No wonder you were able to make it to floor 23. The holy sword won’t make dungeon diving a breeze, but it sure should make it easier.”

“Wait a minute. Is Guide of the Holy Sword really that amazing?” asked none other than Roslia herself. “It’s true that the sword makes fighting easier, but it’s basically just a nifty sharp blade I can produce on command. If I’m being honest, I think Force has it easier thanks to Superior Sword Mastery...”

“Are you kidding me...?” Diego was shocked to hear this. “You’re not using the Guide of the Holy Sword to its full potential?”

“Is there some way to use it other than as a sword?”

“Ignorance is a scary thing... The fact you made it to floor 23 without knowing how to wield your skill is downright impressive,” Diego sighed, clutching his head.

“I thought the same thing,” Sofie piped up from next to me. “When I first saw Roslia fight, I was surprised the Arrivers had someone with such a skill, but her abilities didn’t live up to it.”

“That’s what you thought of me?! No wonder you gave me so much flak when we went dungeon diving!”

Indeed, Sofie had been extremely hard on Roslia back when the six of us first started diving together. This explained why. She’d had a reason for being such a stickler... It all made sense now.

“Anyways, no one ever taught me how to wield it, so how should I know any better?! Ganging up on me for that is so mean!”

“Heh, serves you right,” Erin chuckled.

“Now you sound like a villain too,” Roslia shot back, glaring at her.

I could kinda relate. I knew the pain of not knowing how to maximize your skill. Without Jin, I never would’ve known I could use Mapping in the dungeon. If it weren’t for the Arrivers, I would’ve stayed a bottom-tier adventurer all my life.

“Sorry, miss. I didn’t mean anything by it. As an apology, I’ll tell you what I

know about the sacred skills,” offered Diego.

“Really? If you’re that contrite, then I’ll allow you to do me this service.”

“Your attitude’s kinda giving me second thoughts...” He scratched his head. “Well, whatever. There’re three strengths when it comes to the sacred skill series.”

“Three?”

“Yup. The first one comes to you naturally—understanding the optimal way to handle your type of weapon. For the holy sword, you gain swordsmanship. And for the holy firearm, I gain marksmanship. This applies to other swords and guns as well, not just the holy one.”

Diego paused his explanation to retrieve the dark purple rifle from his back, pointing it up at the sky.

“For example, this is the same gun the floor boss here uses. It’s a dungeon artifact obtained by the first party to clear floor 23 years and years ago, and it was bought and sold after the fact until it reached my hands.”

With that, Diego brought the scope up to his eye for a brief instant before pulling the trigger. The bullet he fired put a hole in the roof of a ruined building in the distance.

“Just like that. There’s no mastery skill for firearms, and the only skills that can increase your aptitude for them are Marksman of the Holy Gun, Artillery Specialist, or Magic Item Specialist. I appreciate the ability, but given what mastery skills can do for other weapon types, it’d be hard to call Marksman of the Holy Gun a legendary skill just for that.”

This time, he summoned his holy guns, shining with magical energy.

“This here’s the second strength. When you summon your holy weapon, magical energy rushes forth, right? That magical energy doesn’t come from you, the holder of the skill. It’s dense mana that originates from the weapon. If you use this to activate spells or artifacts...”

Diego took aim at the same target and fired. There was a loud explosion as the entire building collapsed into rubble. This was probably how he’d defeated

the mid-boss.

“As you can see,” he said, “you draw out more power this way.”

“That’s amazing. If I could use Fractus’s energy for spells, then...” Based on the fire aglow in her eyes, it seemed Roslia had realized the true potential of her skill. “So, what’s the third strength?”

“Dunno.”

“...Huh?”

“I don’t know.”

“Wh-What do you mean?! Was all that explanation just for show?!”

“No, I just don’t know the particular strength of your holy sword. Holy weapons take different forms and abilities based on their wielders. For example, my Holy Gun Starcia here takes the form of two handguns, but past holy guns have been revolvers or shotguns. Same for its ability. My Starcia specializes in quickdraw, but other holy guns have been different.”

“So my Fractus has some kind of ability as well?”

“That’s right. The fact you don’t know what it is is proof you haven’t mastered your skill yet. Once you can use it to its fullest, its special ability will eventually reveal itself.”

“You’re making it sound like it’s my fault I haven’t learned it yet... As frustrating as that is, I’ll take it as a compliment that I still have room to grow!”

Though she’d appeared disappointed at first, Roslia quickly picked herself up with her inherent optimism. A fighting spirit had been lit within her.

Guide of the Holy Sword and Saint's Authority

"Hrm... This is hard..." grumbled Roslia.

After running into Diego and Lou on floor 23 the other day, our parties had explored together for a bit. Since Liberation already had experience on the floor, we'd made sure to observe their tactics and formations carefully. Lou was a crestcaster, and their healer was another rare battle style—a shaman—but the member that stood out was definitely Diego. The Marksman of the Holy Gun was on another level. He could shoot straight through the mechanical soldiers, advancing like a one-man army.

Thanks to that, our combined group had reached the boss chamber like it was nothing. It was hard to believe that the Arrivers struggled before meeting up with Liberation. Losing a sword had left Force in less than ideal fighting condition, but when Diego and his teammates shared that getting to the boss was actually harder than fighting the boss, we decided to give it a go. The Arrivers then made quick work of the sniper and returned to Puriff victorious.

It had been several days since then, and Roslia and I were now back in the dungeon to train. Diego had pointed out that she hadn't yet fully mastered Guide of the Holy Sword, but since we didn't know what her sword's special ability was, we couldn't experiment with it in town. We'd instead chosen an early floor that was relatively empty in case something big happened...but so far, we'd gotten no results.

Sofie, who'd come along to help with training, scolded Roslia. "Take this seriously," she said.

"I am! In fact, that's my line, Sofie! You said your High Appraisal would help, but you haven't given me any advice whatsoever! Just what is my holy sword's ability?"

"I don't know. I can't see it. It might not be fixed yet."

"How does that work?"

“I don’t know that either. Just focus on your original goal of mastering the holy sword’s magical power. That might naturally awaken its special ability.”

“Fine! I was only complaining because that’s not going well.”

With that, Roslia began pouring magical energy into a cheap sword she’d grabbed from the bargain bin at the market. Its blade let out a faint glow before cracking.

“See?! This isn’t working after all! The magical energy is too concentrated! I can’t control it!”

“Less talking, more training.”

“You’re too strict, Sofie! There’s no way a cheap sword like this can withstand Fractus’s energy. We should’ve bought a more expensive—”

“We don’t have the funds for you to break item after item. Unless you’re personally willing to foot the bill, that is.”

“Ah, never mind. Let’s stick to the discount swords.”

Roslia took out a new blade and again tried channeling holy magical energy into it. The process wasn’t easy to master. She’d already broken dozens of swords this way.

“If it’s too hard to control the raw magical energy, why don’t you try casting a spell with it?” I suggested.

“Did you already forget about the explosion when I first tried that?”

“Fair... Skip that idea, then.”

When we’d first entered the dungeon for the day, Roslia had tried using her holy sword’s energy to cast Impenetrable Fortress. She’d subsequently lost control of the souped-up spell, inciting a huge explosion. The two of us had gotten caught in the blast and nearly died. Only Sofie had escaped unscathed, albeit stunned, thanks to her Iron Wall skill.

“Let’s stick to practicing with the other swords for now, and maybe if that goes well, we can come back to spells,” I said.

“That sounds good,” Roslia agreed. “I’m not trying to self-destruct here.”

“Well, we won’t be doing any serious dungeon diving until Force gets his hands on a new sword, so it’s definitely not worth risking your life over.”

Force had lost his prized blade Gleaming Beast to a sniper shot from the boss of floor 23. That left him with only his second sword, Purgatory, a cursed weapon that consumed both its targets and its wielder in black flame. Force had learned to resist its damaging side effects during his training over the Arrivers’ off year, but it was still deleterious to use over long periods of time. And since the dungeon demanded back-to-back fighting, Force wanted to find another sword he could use reliably.

“I gotta say, though, Guide of the Holy Sword sure is proving to be a mysterious skill.” Roslia poured holy magical energy into yet another cheap blade, which shattered just like all the others before it. She gazed at its remains and muttered, “It’s supposed to be incredible, but it’s impossible to figure out how to use... I’d rather have Superior Sword Mastery than this.”

“Aww, don’t say that,” I replied. “It’s EX rarity.”

“Actually, speaking of, isn’t Neme’s skill EX rarity too?”

“Now that you mention it...”

Roslia was right. Our priestess also had a mysterious skill called Saint’s Authority. According to Diego, the sacred skills were a series of legendary weapon skills championed by Roslia’s Guide of the Holy Sword. Saint’s Authority supposedly fell into a different category.

“Say, Roslia, do you think it’s possible she’s not using her skill to its fullest either?”

“Sofie, can you tell with High Appraisal?”

“Me?” The question caught Sofie by surprise. She cocked her head, puzzled. “Kind of...”

“So what’s the answer?”

“It’s true. She might not be capitalizing on its full potential.”

“Wait, really?!”

“But in a different way from you, Roslia. For starters, Saint’s Authority isn’t a

combat skill. Instead, it's where she gets her high-level arts and original spells. They're a byproduct of the skill."

"A byproduct?"

"Yeah. Originally, Saint's Authority was apparently used to receive divine revelations."

Here we go with talk of the divine again... Our talk with Lou the other day briefly came to mind.

"What do you mean 'apparently'?" Roslia asked. "That's a little vague."

Sofie shook her head. "High Appraisal doesn't tell me everything about what a skill can do. I see the text description rendered on the divine slate, but I rarely learn any more than that. That includes your Guide of the Holy Sword."

"Divine revelations, huh...? Do you think Neme's ever had one?" Roslia asked.

"Yeah... I dunno about that," I replied.

"I was curious and asked her about it once," said Sofie. "But she said no. It seems to be too difficult for her. That's why I said she wasn't using the skill to its full potential."

"I see."

That made sense. Neme didn't really strike me as a recipient of oracles in the first place. She was supposed to be a priestess, yet she barely practiced the beliefs of Cecinaism. Maybe that was why she couldn't hear the words of God.

"Well, it's not like divine revelations would have much impact on dungeon diving."

"You never know. What if they could tell us a shortcut to the last floor?"

"If God was that benevolent, then this death trap of a dungeon would never exist in the first place."

"Still, it might answer the question of who actually made it."

"That's a good point. Let's ask Neme when we get back."

With that, we wrapped up our chat and returned to Roslia's training, completely oblivious to the catastrophe unfolding around the priestess in

question at the exact same time.

Holy Intruders

For me, Force Granz, the day began like any other. Erin was in charge of making breakfast in the morning, and then Note and Sofie took off with Roslia to go play holy sword practice in the dungeon. That left Erin, Neme, and me at home together. I wasn't on particularly chatty terms with either of them, so I was thinking of doing some sword training or going out to shop for a replacement sword... But then the doorbell rang. I peered out the window curiously to find men and women in religious garb on our doorstep.

"What do these guys want...?"

I didn't know them. No way was I friends with such a suspicious-looking group of weirdos. They were clearly dressed like Cecinaists, though, so I figured they might be here for Roslia or Neme. I warily opened the door, and the man at the head of the group addressed me.

"Neme Pargin is in this house, isn't she?" he asked.

"Who are you people?" I asked right back.

The man raised his hand. I grimaced. *Shit*. My instincts... No, my Mind's Eye was telling me an attack was coming. I could see a ray of light.

The man opened his mouth and uttered, "En Charl."

I immediately moved out of the path of the ray and reached for my sword with my right hand.

"Tch!"

I instantly realized my mistake. I wasn't wearing my sword right now—I was still in my house clothes. So instead, I hurriedly reached out for whatever was nearby. I ended up grabbing an umbrella resting in the entryway and thrust it forward between the ray—now rays—of light. Everyone behind him was now casting spells too. The rays I saw were actually magical chains.

Not even Superior Sword Mastery could handle six spells at once with only an

umbrella. I managed to deflect three and entangle another, but that was the best I could do. The remaining two chains caught me by my arms and legs, then coiled around my whole body.

A binding spell, huh? Magic like this was hard to struggle against. Impossible, actually. It was a fairly advanced holy art, and I was dealing with it from *two* casters. I couldn't move my limbs at all. I collapsed by the front door, cocooned like a caterpillar.

"I'll cast another just in case. En Charl," said the man at the lead.

With a third binding spell from him personally, I was restricted even tighter. There was absolutely no way for me to break out of this now.

"The greatest threat, Force Granz, has been neutralized. Sofie Deanlurk, Roslia Minkgott, and Note Athlon are currently at the dungeon. Suppress Erin Fortlord immediately and retrieve the target."

"As you command!"

The group behind the leader bowed their heads before promptly barging in. I had no idea what was going on here, but no well-meaning houseguests greet you with binding magic.

My mouth was still free, so I loudly yelled, "Erin, we got a situation!"

"What now? I'm busy washing dishes!" She came out of the kitchen, still holding a dish she was drying.

"En Charl!"

"Huh?!" As I expected, she immediately fell prey to the binding magic too. "What the hell is this?! You made me drop the plate!"

So useless... Erin rolled around the hall, kicking and struggling. We were completely done for. *Damn it!*

Thinking about it, this couldn't have happened at a worse time. Erin and I used weapon-dependent battle styles. Without a sword and staff, we were pretty much useless. Roslia and Sofie could hold their own unarmed—maybe even Note too. If just one of them had stayed behind, we might've stood a chance. But there was no use in crying over spilled milk. I had to think of a way

to clean this mess up.

“What do you want with Neme?” I asked.

Figuring there was nothing more I could do on my own, I switched to prying as much information as I could out of the intruders. The man in charge had said something about retrieving a target, not eliminating one. So, at the very least, they didn’t plan on killing Neme. That meant there was a chance we could rescue her later so long as we could identify these people. Too bad their leader didn’t fall for it.

“What makes you think I’ll answer?” he said, barely sparing me a glance before giving his subordinates more orders. “We need to leave before anyone notices the commotion. Squad A will search the first floor and Squad B will take the second. Make sure you obtain the vessel of the saint no matter what.”

“*Vessel of the saint*”? That caught my attention. Neme had a skill called Saint’s Authority. I didn’t know much of the details—mostly thanks to Neme’s terrible explanations—but I could only guess these creeps were after Neme’s power rather than Neme herself.

“I’ve got her!”

A man came down from the stairs with Neme over his shoulder, magically bound just like Erin and me. She was struggling with all her might against the restraints.

“What do you want with Neme now?! Let go of me!”

That almost made it sound like she knew these guys. Even if they weren’t willing to talk, I was willing to bet that Neme would. So in spite of the risk involved, I went all in.

“Neme! Who are these guys?!”

“They got you too, Force?!”

“Forget about that! Answer me quick!”

“Cardinal Fuge is my old—”

“Silence.” With that single word, the man in charge used a spell to knock out Neme. He proceeded to do the same to Erin, then walked over to me. “I will

spare your lives this time. You can thank God later.”

I could tell he was about to use the spell thanks to Mind’s Eye, but I was bound up so tight that I couldn’t even wriggle out of the way. The impact rattled my brainpan, and as I slowly lost consciousness, I glared up at the man coldly.

Just you wait. I won’t forget your face. You’re gonna regret laying a hand on my teammates.

The flames of vengeance were stoked within me as everything faded to black.

Clues of the Kidnappers

The scene that awaited us back at HQ made me doubt my eyes. The front door was open. The entryway was a mess. Force and Erin were tied up on the floor. We immediately freed them and helped them up, hoping to get an explanation.

According to Force, a mysterious group of clerics had come knocking, attacked without warning, and taken Neme away. I quickly used Enemy Detect to scan the area for Neme or anyone suspicious, but I didn't get any hits. They were already out of range. Considering how quickly they'd disappeared—moreover, how they'd chosen to attack while the Arrivers' tracker was busy in the dungeon—I could only assume that the kidnappers had planned out their ambush. It was my fault for not noticing them while they were making their preparations.

Fortunately, Force was able to get the name “Cardinal Fuge” out of Neme, but none of us knew who that was. I thought Roslia would know all the big names of the Cecinaist faith, yet she was as oblivious as the rest of us. I tried to think of other acquaintances familiar with Cecinaism but came up blank.

While I was racking my brains, Sofie offered up, “Gilbert might know something.”

Of course! Consulting the Legion's war priest was a great idea. He was renowned for being the strongest inquisitor and had once held a preeminent role in the church. If we went to see him, we might even get to talk to Leyfa too. A royal like her was bound to know all kinds of people, so it was possible that she'd have some clue about who'd kidnapped Neme. We thus decided that Sofie, Force, and I would go to see the princess. Meanwhile, Roslia and Erin would go around town to see what information she could collect about the suspicious group.

We rang the door to the princess's hotel room. A familiar face answered soon

after.

“You lot again?” Despite her displeased expression, Leyfa let us in. We promptly told the Legion what had happened. After listening to our story, Leyfa said, “Cardinal Fuge... Doesn’t sound like anyone in our church. Do you know this person, Gilbert?”

“Indeed. He’s from abroad. I believe he’s the cardinal of Aifan, which is known as the motherland of Cecinaism.”

“Where’s that?” I asked, unfamiliar with the circumstances of neighboring nations.

Leyfa was the one to answer me. “It’s the next country beyond our southern neighbor. They have a large population of other species like dwarves, and they were once known for their production of magic tools. Aifan doesn’t have a dungeon, so it’s not as bustling as it used to be, but it’s still famous for two things.”

“What are they?”

“The first is holy arts. Like Gilbert said, it’s basically the capital of Cecinaism. And the other is skills. Aifan is allegedly the world’s front-runner in skill research.”

Skill research, huh? Like dungeons, the true nature of skills was beyond human knowledge. It didn’t surprise me that people were studying them.

“It’s said that Aifan has succeeded in directing which skills are bestowed upon a petitioner. In other words, they’re able to pick and choose the skills they desire as a nation.”

“Is that even possible...?”

If that was true, it’d be a miracle. People like me could be spared the misery of pulling undesirable skills and having their dreams crushed. I was a little jealous.

“At any rate, my hands are tied if another nation is involved. If royalty interferes, it will become an international incident. I must maintain neutrality.”

“Right, of course...”

Not even the Tyrant Princess would act that far out of line. I'd held on to a faint hope that she'd bend the rules for us after we'd saved her butt on floor 21, but I understood where she was coming from as a princess.

"For the same reason, I cannot lend you the aid of my party members as they're considered my direct subordinates. Is that clear, Miya?"

"Huh?! Why are you singling me out?!"

"Because you'd probably say something like, 'If Note's begging for help like this, I guess I gotta do something. I can't just abandon my childhood friend.' Then you'd smugly run off to assist him."

"I would not! Probably not, anyway... I mean, Erin's an Arriver too, right? So if my friend's in need, then I guess I gotta—"

"That's exactly what I'm talking about. And don't go using your new friend as an excuse to indebt your childhood friend." Leyfa lightly smacked Miya in the head, then turned back to us. "Well, there you have it. I do hope you won't hold this against me. I have my own circumstances to consider."

"Don't worry. Just knowing the identity of the kidnappers is a huge help. Now we can go after Neme. Honestly, thank you."

"Hold on. I'm not done yet." Leyfa had done enough already, so what she said next truly took me by surprise. "If your party succeeds in retrieving Neme Pargin, you can leave the rest to me. I'll use my power as princess to make sure the cardinal never lays a hand on you again."

I was stunned silent.

"What's that dumb look for?" she asked.

"Well..."

"Note's in shock. I bet he never expected you to offer a hand," Miya chuckled, patting Leyfa on the shoulder. "Ha ha, Leyfa's too shy to be honest. If you want to help Note, just say so! You don't have to be so indirect."

"...What?"

"You're so cute! Look at you playing coy!"

“I take everything back, Note Athlon. Because of your childhood friend, I shall no longer lift a finger for you.”

“What?!”

“If you must blame someone, blame Miya.”

This was a hundred percent my stupid childhood friend’s fault. I shot Miya a glare, and she carried on without any sign of remorse.

“I’ll deal with Miya later.” Leyfa cleared her throat and continued, “Now, do you really intend on going to Aifan? The cardinal is basically the highest position of the church. If a person like that is making a move, you may as well consider every Cecinaist in Aifan your enemy.”

“No. Aifan itself is basically run by the church. It would be more like taking on the entire nation,” Gilbert corrected.

Taking on an entire nation, huh? That should be enough to give anyone pause, but unfortunately, I already had my answer. Who gave a crap about one country? We were the vanguard challengers of a dungeon no one had ever conquered before. A nation or two didn’t scare me after some of the floor bosses we’d faced.

“Shouldn’t you know better than anyone that a warning like that won’t stop us, Princess Leyfa?”

“Indeed. If that worked, you’d be under my thumb by now.”

“That’s right.”

Following that, we turned to leave. Neme was probably in the middle of being taken to Aifan. Since the intruders had gone for abduction first, her life probably wasn’t in immediate danger, but that didn’t mean we could take our sweet time. As we were walking out of the room, Leyfa called to us from behind.

“Do at least try to return safely.”

“I didn’t know you cared so much, Your Highness,” I called back.

“I wasn’t talking to you. I was talking to Sofie.”

“...Of course.”

“I’m leaving her in your care, so you had best see to it that she doesn’t meet her end outside of the dungeon. I don’t want her going through anything painful.”

“We’re going to get Neme back to prevent that.”

This was probably Leyfa’s way of cheering us on. As Miya had pointed out, the princess wasn’t very straightforward, but she *was* worried about us. Right now, she could only be honest with Sofie alone. Given how she’d only seen the faithful knight as a pawn in the past, however, I considered that plenty of progress.

“We’ll be off now, Your Highness,” Sofie replied happily before we made our exit.

A Brief Reunion

Once we decided to go rescue Neme, we set off for the south road. There was an entire country between ours and Aifan, so it would be a long trip. On top of that, all we had to go on was a single name. We didn't know anything about the cardinal or what his motives were. Not even the Arrivers were reckless enough to charge into enemy territory without a plan. We wanted to retrieve Neme as soon as possible, but we knew next to nothing about Aifan. So in order to save Neme, step one was finding an informant.

During our tussle with Leyfa, I'd relied on Eisha and Hugel. That had all been domestic trouble, however, and we were now headed abroad in the opposite direction of the capital where they lived. Just making contact with them would take days, and waiting for a reply would take several more. Rushing off in haste wasn't smart, but we really didn't have time to wait around. And so I was thinking of relying on someone else—someone who I'd heard had moved to the small country between Puriff and Aifan. She wasn't an Aifan resident, but I figured she had to know more than we did.

We arrived in the small town where she lived and checked in at the only inn around. It was already evening. With the sun dipping into the western sky, I made for her house alone. It looked completely ordinary. A small, cozy building. Hanging plants decorated the space under the eaves. A window was aglow with a faint light from inside. I rang the brand new powder blue doorbell and waited several moments for a familiar face to answer.

"...Huh?!" she exclaimed when she saw me.

"It's been a while," I replied.

"What are you doing here...?"

"Are you that surprised?"

"I just never thought I'd see you in these parts... I suppose I can't be too surprised when I told you where I was moving, but I didn't think you'd actually

come see me, Girl Snatcher!”

“That name brings back memories, Master.”

That’s right—the person I was meeting was the teacher Jin had introduced me to back in Puriff. It was Riece, the woman who’d taught me how to fight like a thief. It had been two years since we’d seen each other. The last time we’d spoken was after Jin died. I’d lost a teammate, my goal, and my direction—and when I went to see her, she’d told me she was quitting adventuring. She’d also told me she was thinking of returning to her hometown in a small country en route to Aifan.

Two years was so long and yet so short. I hadn’t changed much in that time, but that wasn’t the case for Riece. Her hair was longer now and her voice wasn’t as excited as it used to be. What stood out the most, though, was her apron. I had a strong mental image of her from her adventuring days, so it felt out of place.

“It does, doesn’t it? Oh, but they call you the Sage Snatcher now, don’t they? I saw it in the newspaper.”

“Huh? That story reached all the way here?”

“Izaar’s Seventh Sage Selection is an event of international interest, you know? Plus, I was curious about what my old pupil was up to.”

“I see...”

“So should I call you the Sage Snatcher now too?”

“It’s fine. You can use what you always used to.”

I was already having trouble connecting with her like we used to. If she started calling me something different on top of that, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to talk to her the same way anymore.

“So, what’s up? What brings you here?” she asked.

“There’s something I’d like to consult you about, but I was also just hoping to catch up. Are you free right now, Master?”

“The house is a bit messy... And I’m in the middle of making dinner, but hang on. I’ll finish things up and we can go to a nearby cafe to talk.”

“All right.”

“Wait for me there, will you?”

Riece gave me directions and then disappeared back inside her house. I headed to the cafe and ordered a coffee while I waited. Thinking back on it, Riece had told me she was quitting at a cafe too, hadn't she? As I was pondering that coincidence, she appeared at the store and took the seat across from me. It seemed she'd had the same thought...

“We met at a cafe like this last time too, didn't we?” she joked.

“We did indeed.”

“This one's a lot smaller and emptier in comparison, though,” she chuckled, ordering a coffee for herself. Once her drink arrived, she spoke up again. “Didn't you say you were going to quit adventuring as well?”

“Yeah, but one thing led to another and now I'm back in the dungeon. How about you, Master?”

“See for yourself.” Riece placed her left hand on the table. The silver band on her ring finger sparkled in the light. “I got married.”

“...I figured as much. Congratulations.”

I'd had my suspicions when I saw her house. She'd quit adventuring because she wanted to get married and live a normal life. The plate on her door was inscribed with a different last name, and she hadn't invited me inside.

“What's with the delayed reply? You should be congratulating me sincerely.”

“I was just a little taken aback.”

“What for? Is it that strange for me to be married?”

“That's not it. I'm really happy for you.”

“Good. To tell you the truth, no one's more taken aback by all this than me.” Riece gazed at her ring with a distant look. “When I returned here, I lived with my parents at first. I'd left home in a hurry saying I wanted to become an adventurer, so I knew they worried for me. I guess I wanted to be a good daughter finally.”

“I see.”

“Since I was still a bachelorette, my parents abruptly decided to introduce me to someone. He was a neighbor that I knew but had never talked to before, so I wasn’t enthusiastic about it. But my parents were persistent, so I agreed to meet him once...” Riece grinned shyly. “And when I did, I started considering it more and more. Before long, we’d grown close, and then we were married before I knew it.”

“Married before you knew it, huh? Isn’t matrimony supposed to be more momentous than that?”

“I don’t know how else to describe it. Nevertheless, I’m happy now. When I was young, I thought life would be boring if I quit adventuring. I thought it was better to live hard and fast than to be killed by a long, dull life. But after living the boring life, I’ve realized it’s not so bad. I’m rather fond of this dullness now.” After saying all that, Riece looked back at me. “But you didn’t come here just to hear that, did you? Why are you actually in town?”

Riece must have realized it—that I wasn’t really here to catch up or reminisce. If someone from your adventuring days walks back into your life, it’s never for a good reason.

“Actually...” Despite my hesitation, I recounted the incident with the mysterious assailants who’d kidnapped Neme. “That’s the story.”

When I was done, she replied, “Sounds rough.”

“Yeah. That’s why I wanted to ask for your help—”

“Unfortunately, I don’t have anything to offer you. I don’t know much about Aifan myself, and most importantly, I have something else to protect right now.” She placed a hand on her stomach. “I’m living for two now, and it would upset my husband. He isn’t particularly handsome or gallant, but he’s extremely gentle. He even tells me he was lucky to marry such a beautiful lady! *Me*, of all people! Isn’t that hilarious?” Riece laughed bashfully, fanning herself with her right hand. “So I can’t go with you. Sorry. My adorable student is in need and I can’t help.”

“It’s fine. I’m the one asking unreasonable favors,” I replied with a forced

smile.

I should've been happy for Riece, yet for some reason I was filled with a sense of loneliness. It had to be because our paths had diverged in life. I was still chasing my dream, but she'd decided to let go of that and grasp happiness instead. There was nothing wrong with that—in fact, it was the right thing to do. Yet knowing that the woman who'd trained me was no longer with me on this long road inspired a special sorrow.

“Thanks for making time for me even when I dropped by out of the blue.”

After Jin died, I fled to the capital. If I had really quit adventuring then, would I be smiling like Riece was right now? I didn't know. Perhaps I would have married Roslia and led a happy life with her. I had a feeling that wouldn't be the case, though. Back then, I'd felt like my ordinary life was missing something. I'd never been able to fully give up on my ambitions. I was different from Riece, who'd walked away from them completely. Maybe it was because of my personality. Maybe it was because I was still immature. Maybe one day I'd grow up for real and give up on clearing the dungeon. But not now. I had to get Neme back so we could keep chasing our dreams.

I stood up to leave, but Riece called after me. “I know I said I can't help, but I might have a bit of advice for you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Going to a local thief for information before marching into an unknown territory is a smart idea. Intel is the key to everything. Thieves aren't the most versatile battle style in the dungeon, but they excel at reconnaissance and fighting human opponents.”

“I see...”

“And there's an especially famous thief in Aifan.” Riece lifted a finger and said, “Suiz Myran, one of the top five thieves in the whole world.”

“So I should seek him out, huh?”

“Getting your precious teammate back should be a piece of cake then.”

“There's someone like that in Aifan?” I gulped at this new lead. I found it a

little difficult to swallow that I wasn't aware of such a renowned thief after years of being one myself.

"I've only heard rumors, so I don't know what he's really like, but maybe he can help you out. Although I suspect the Girl Snatcher could solve this all by himself."

"No. I know I can't do this alone. Thanks for the tip."

Her former student had shown up out of nowhere to ask the impossible, yet she'd still been kind enough to point me in the right direction. Riece really was a thoughtful person. Even after quitting adventuring, she was still my teacher. We may have taken different paths in life, but that would never change.

"I'm glad I got to see you again, Master."

"I don't think I was that helpful."

"That's not what I mean. I'm glad to see you're happy." This time, I was able to tell her from the bottom of my heart. "Allow me to say it properly. Congratulations on getting married. I hope you have wonderful days ahead of you, Master."

"You don't need to hope. I'm already living a wonderful happily married life." With a beaming smile, Riece clenched her right hand into a fist. "Go and get your priestess back, Girl Snatcher. Then go and conquer the dungeon for me. Make me proud as your former teacher."

"Don't worry. That's exactly what I plan to do. Except you're not my former teacher—you'll always be Master to me."

"Gosh, you're such a charmer now!"

That was my brief but warm reunion with Riece.

The Retrieval of Neme Pargin

When Neme woke up, she was met with the sight of a simple wooden ceiling she didn't recognize. Puzzled by this, she tried to sit up...but found herself unable to move. She craned her neck to get a look at herself and discovered that her arms and legs were bound by chains of light.

"What is this...?"

Was she having a nightmare? That was Neme's first thought. She'd had one before her nap too. She'd dreamed of lazing about at HQ on her day off when, all of a sudden, there was a commotion coming from downstairs. She opened her door out of curiosity and was greeted by a familiar face. Then— "Are you finally awake?" someone asked, snapping Neme back to her present predicament with a flinch. She knew that voice.

She turned to look in the direction it was coming from and nearly did a double take. "Cardinal Fuge..."

Was the nightmare still ongoing? Or could it be that none of this was a dream at all? She'd only just come to, so she was still trying to process the situation. Before she knew it, her mouth was opening of its own accord.

"Why...?" she whispered.

"Hmm? Why what?" the man before her replied.

"Why...are you here?"

"Is it that surprising?" he said, bowing slowly. "I simply came to pick you up so that you may guide the lost believers as the current Saint Cecina."

Cardinal Fuge's shameless answer made Neme clench her fists. What right did he have to say that? She felt like giving him a piece of her mind.

"Why Neme?!" she shouted.

"Shouldn't you know that answer best of all?"

"Because of my skill?! Even so, Neme isn't cut out to be the saint!"

“Say what you will, but God has already made the decision. You possess the qualities of the saint.”

Cardinal Fuge didn't actually need Neme. He was only after her skill, Saint's Authority. Neme had never asked for it. She felt its bestowal on her was a mistake—one that had changed her life dramatically.

“I told you I didn't want to be the saint! That's why I wrote that note and left —”

“We couldn't accept that scrap of paper, I'm afraid. Besides, becoming the saint is the greatest honor of all Cecinaism. Why does it displease you so?”

“You should know that I'm not cut out for it! That's what everyone always told me!”

“That was *before* you obtained your skill. A mere failing of judgment on our part.”

“Still, there are lots of people who are better suited than me! Like the current saint—”

“Arcia? She's doing well as acting saint, but she's nothing more than that. You know that as well as I do. Only the holder of Saint's Authority may assume the title of Saint Cecina.”

“I don't care! Neme has no intention of becoming the saint! Arcia should just do it!”

“In defiance of God's wishes?”

“That's right! No matter what God says, Neme won't become the saint!”

“Is that so? You haven't changed, I see. No matter what anyone says to you, you never relent.” Cardinal Fuge sighed heavily in disappointment. Neme cheered in her heart. She felt like she'd won the argument...until the cardinal retrieved a silver object from his breast pocket. “This leaves me with no choice but to kill you.”

“Huh?! Is that a gun?! Wait!” Neme shrieked.

“What's the matter?”

“How did things suddenly turn to killing?! Isn’t that a little sudden?!”

“Surely you saw this coming. No two people can have the same EX-rarity skill at the same time. As long as you possess Saint’s Authority, no other follower can inherit it.”

“That doesn’t mean you can kill me for it! What if there’s still a chance I could be persuaded into becoming the saint?!”

“You just said otherwise yourself. That you wouldn’t become the saint even if God ordered you to.”

“Maybe Neme just misspoke! Maybe I’ll consider becoming the saint after all!”

“Will you?”

“No way! Neme has no intention of becoming the saint!”

“So there’s no chance after all. Then—”

“Don’t point that gun at me! It was just a slip of the tongue!”

“I’ll consider it a confession, then. This part of you hasn’t changed either, always spouting whatever is most convenient for you...”

“Wait! Neme was wrong!”

The tiny priestess broke out into a cold sweat, but her pleading was interrupted when the door in the back of the room opened. The person who appeared through it was none other than the familiar face she’d seen right before losing consciousness at HQ.



“Cardinal Fuge, I believe it’s still too early to resort to that,” the woman said.

“Arcia?!” Neme’s voice squeaked when she saw her. “What are you doing here?!”

“I participated in the operation to bring you back, obviously,” Arcia replied.

“Please save me, Arcia! I wanna go back home to the Arrivers!”

“Were you not listening? I just said I was cooperating with Cardinal Fuge. I am your enemy.”

“That isn’t true! You’re so nice, and you’ve always been on Neme’s side! Even back when we were in Aifan—”

“That’s all in the past. Things are different now,” Arcia said coldly.

When Neme stopped to think about it, Arcia’s tone and expression were completely different from what she remembered. Arcia had always worn a friendly smile around Neme, but the fake grin on her face now felt more like a mask.

“What did you do to Arcia?!” Neme demanded of the cardinal. “Did you brainwash her?!”

“Nothing of the sort. I’m doing this of my own free will.”

“That’s what all brainwashed people say! Isn’t that right, Cardinal Fuge?!”

“No, she’s not brainwashed...”

“That’s what all brainwashers say!”

“It seems there’s no way we’re going to get through to her...” Cardinal Fuge looked exasperated. He cleared his throat with a cough and turned to Arcia. “That aside, why are you suddenly against killing her? You’re not thinking of betraying me now, are you?”

“Of course not. I just believe it’s too early to give up on plans A and B while moving straight to our last resort.”

“Plan A was to make Neme Pargin the saint, and that’s already off the table, no? Plan B requires someone with Miracle Usurper to steal her skill, but we’ve yet to find anyone with it. So wouldn’t it be most pragmatic to move on to our

final measure?”

“Killing Neme won’t make Saint’s Authority appear in someone else immediately. Neme here is the first to inherit it in decades. Rather than gambling on a new saint candidate getting it, it’d be far easier to convince Neme to take up the mantle of sainthood.”

“I don’t see that being easier.”

“Allow me to convince her. We know each other.”

“You’re not just getting sympathetic because you were friends during your training days as saint candidates, are you?”

“If I had any sympathy for Neme, I wouldn’t have participated in the operation to retrieve her.”

“Fair point.” Cardinal Fuge nodded, convinced.

Neme, however, could scarcely keep up at this point. Seeing Arcia, how she’d changed, and the threat she now posed overwhelmed the tiny priestess. Her head was spinning. The only thing she could process was the most obvious of all—these people weren’t going to help her.

“You two might be up to no good,” she shouted defiantly, “but just you wait! Note and the others are going to come save me like they did with Leyfa!”

“Note Athlon, hmm?” Arcia muttered, covering one eye with the palm of her hand. “He certainly poses the greatest threat to us, but we planned around that. His Mapping and Enemy Search combination is only useful in the dungeon where the rules of this world do not apply. We timed our operation so that he wouldn’t be there when we struck, and the mission was a success. By the time he returned, we were long out of his range. I can see much further with Greater Far Sight than he can with his skill and arts. In fact, I can track the Arrivers even now.” Arcia lowered her hand and looked down at Neme. “So don’t expect anyone to rescue you. We’ll depart from this inn at dawn and head for Aifan by carriage. If you put up resistance during that time, we’ll have to resort to Cardinal Fuge’s plan instead.”

“Arcia...”

“If you don’t want to die, behave yourself.”

Neme could only respond with a gulp. She could hardly believe this was the same girl she’d known.

Aifan and the Thieves Guild

It took us ten days to reach Aifan following Neme's kidnapping, but even once we'd entered the country, we were still a long ways from our destination. According to the merchants in our carriage, Cardinal Fuge was a well-known figure in these parts. He was most likely in Visril, the capital of both the country and Cecinaism, which was another five days' ride from the border. When we were finally closing in on the city, I looked out the carriage window to see a mountain with its summit hollowed out like a crater.

"That's Visril?" I wondered out loud.

Our driver then asked, "Hmm? Is this your first time here?"

"It is indeed. If you don't mind, could you tell us a bit about the city?" Roslia inquired with her natural sociability.

"Well, who could say no to such a charming young lady?" he replied warmly. "Several hundred years ago in the warring era, not even Aifan was spared. The nation was under constant fire. All its major cities were devastated by war, and while Visril was protected thanks to its mountaintop location, the threat crept closer with each passing day."

The driver immediately dove into the city's history. Roslia was asking more about its current situation, but neither of us could bring ourselves to interrupt his impassioned lecture. We decided to hear him out.

"That was when a hero appeared—Forge Maltaios the dwarf. The children of our land still know his name to this day. He feared an attack on Visril and made a grand plan to defend it all by himself. His idea, you ask? Turn Visril into a mountain fortress."

"A mountain fortress?"

"That's right. It would've been one thing for the powers that be to propose it, but Forge was just a young commoner at the time. Given the terrain, everyone laughed at him and said it was impossible. Yet nevertheless, Forge set about his

plan.”

“Did he actually do it?” Roslia asked as she gazed out the window.

The driver answered proudly, “He sure did, in defiance of everyone’s expectations. Of course, it was rough going at first. There’s no way a lone boy can transform an entire city into a fortress. But along the way, he turned fifteen and got his skill—the legendary Bearer of the Holy Hammer.”

“Bearer of the Holy Hammer...” I muttered.

I hadn’t expected to hear about another entry in the sacred skill series that Diego had mentioned here. It was the third I knew about after Guide of the Holy Sword and Marksman of the Holy Gun. I’d only been half listening to the driver’s story, but it was possible that the legend of Forge might give us some hint about how to unlock Roslia’s true power with her own skill. I decided to pay full attention to the rest of the lecture.

“Forge used his holy hammer to rebuild the city. Sturdy bedrock was built up into sturdier ramparts. He left the vegetation untouched—but added turrets, of course. The tricky terrain of the city was refashioned into a complex labyrinth for invaders. As a result, Visril became an impregnable fortress, and all the residents sang Forge’s praises. That’s the story of the city.”

“You can do that much with a single skill, huh?”

“That’s right. That’s how this became the holy land of Cecinaism. Visril was protected from the flames of war because of a single miracle that God bestowed upon a boy. Roughly a hundred years later, the capital moved to Visril, where it remains to this day.”

“In other words, this place looks like a normal mountain from afar, but it can fire cannons whenever it wants?” Roslia asked, pensively tapping her cheek with her index finger.

The man driving the carriage laughed. “Perhaps I’ve misled you. Visril *was* a fortress centuries ago. The magic left by the holy hammer has long dried up, so the city’s just a shell of what it once was. Still, it’s a fine place. These are peaceful times, so it’s not a problem.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“There are many relics of its days as a fortress, though. You can enjoy them as sightseeing spots nowadays. There are lots of tourists who get enamored with the unconventional cityscape. If I didn’t have work, I would’ve loved to give you and your friends a tour, miss.”

“We’d also love to take a look around if we didn’t have business to attend to ourselves. Maybe next time,” Roslia said with a friendly smile.

Indeed, we had an important mission—to retrieve Neme. While the man’s story about Visril was extremely interesting, we didn’t have any time to waste right now. I gazed up at the looming mountain, thinking about how we probably wouldn’t have the leisure to sightsee after the chaos we were about to cause.

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Upon reaching Visril, we found an inn and set up our base of operations there. Once we knew Neme’s general whereabouts, the rest would be a piece of cake. With Mapping and Enemy Search, the instant she was in my range, I could identify her presence and pinpoint her location.

It turned out that Neme was confined to a room within the main church in the city center. From what I could tell, her life wasn’t in any danger—a relief for now. She was being held at Salengre Cathedral, however, which doubled as the highest administrative body in Aifan. Whereas our country was ruled by a king, Aifan was governed by the Cecinaist pope. In other words, Neme was basically being held prisoner at the royal palace. There was no way regular adventurers could sneak in, much less bust someone out.

Thus we decided to take Riece’s advice and seek the aid of the strongest thief in town, Suiz Myran. If Cardinal Fuge had taken Neme in on official business, our attempt to rescue her would be seen as an act of hostility against Aifan. At worst, we’d be branded criminals here. That would make it difficult to enlist the help of Suiz Myran if he was a resident, but it would also make it extremely difficult to get Neme back in a city we knew nothing about. We’d have to find the famous thief first.

The hitch was that we had no information on his whereabouts. All major cities had guilds for different battle styles where the locals could register their roles. Visril was no exception, so I promptly headed for the thieves guild. I didn’t want

to go alone, but traveling in too big of a group would only draw attention. I'd decided to bring just Erin along. Staring in from outside now that we were here wasn't going to help us, though, so we proceeded inside.

"Hello..." I said.

"Hello there," replied the receptionist at the counter. "Are you here to register? Or to post a request?"

As I worriedly turned over how best to bring up our business, Erin took a deep breath.

"Is there a thief named Suiz Myran around?" she asked. "We heard he's skilled, so we have a job for him."

She was really dependable at times like this. I was jealous of her fearlessness.

"Suiz Myran, you say?" The receptionist frowned, troubled.

Was there something wrong? As Erin and I exchanged a questioning look, a man sitting on a sofa in the lobby stood up and staggered over, a beer in one hand.

"If you came to the thieves guild looking for Suiz Myran, you must be outsiders," he said.

"What? Who do you think you are, sidling up to us and calling us outsiders? Even if you're drunk, isn't that a little rude?"

To think the day had come that Erin, of all people, called someone else out for being rude... As I was reeling in shock, the man brushed his hair out of his face.

"Whoops, yeah. You're right. My bad. I just thought I'd pipe up since it was clear you don't know anything."

"Do you know Suiz Myran?" Erin pressed.

"Hmm. I'm not sure how I should answer that..." the man mused, leaning against the counter. "At any rate, he's a thief shrouded in secrets. Only a handful of people in this city actually know the guy. Word on the street is that he lives here in town, but anything more than that is a total mystery."

That sure sounded familiar. When I stopped to think about it, the strongest

assassin was also treated as an urban legend. I knew the Headhunter's identity and had been asked to keep it hush-hush in order to keep him safe from anyone who might be seeking revenge, so perhaps Suiz Myran was in a similar situation. Thief jobs were often infiltrations and undercover work, so it was possible that he was trying to keep his identity a secret. I guess the rumor mill worked the same way even abroad.

"In other words, you don't know anything," Erin said in summation.

"Well, that's a harsh way of putting it." The man put his beer bottle down on the counter and scoffed. "But when two young strangers come around asking for him, it's pretty obvious they're outsiders, so don't take it personally. Nothing to be mad about."

"I'm not mad. I'm always like this."

"Ooh, what a strong-willed lass."

"I *could* get mad at any moment, though."

When Erin shot the man a challenging glare, he raised both his hands in surrender. Thank goodness. If we got into a fight with this guy, it'd only delay us from rescuing Neme. Erin really needed to keep the peace.

The man opened his mouth to dispel the tense air. "As an apology, I'll tell you something else I know about Suiz Myran."

"And what's that?"

"He never chooses a job based on the reward. There's one tale of how he didn't agree even when a noble offered him hundreds of millions in gold."

"Are you saying he has his own standards for accepting jobs?" I asked.

"Well, I guess you could say that. The details are a bit hazy," the drunk replied.

That sounded like a stroke of luck for us. The Arrivers were a front-running dungeon party, but we were also perpetually broke. We were currently struggling to afford a replacement for Force's Gleaming Beast. We all wanted to help him out, but we couldn't give him money we didn't have. In light of that, we actually had a prayer of getting Suiz Myran's help if he wasn't financially

motivated.

“So, what business do you two have with Suiz Myran?” the man asked.

“That’s—”

Revealing our goal to some random thief seemed risky. We didn’t even know this guy’s name. All we knew was that he was drinking at the thieves guild in the middle of the day, and he was apparently a bit of a busybody. If we told him we were here to retrieve Neme, he might sell that information to the church. Even if he didn’t go that far, he clearly liked to talk. There was no guarantee that word of our plan wouldn’t reach Cardinal Fuge’s ears.

The man seemed to sense our wariness and opened his arms with a jesting expression. “Come on, there’s no need to be so wary. I’m asking so I can help you out, you know?”

“Help us out?”

“That’s right. Despite appearances, I’m a bona fide thief. Open to requests anytime. I’ll even give you a discount. You guys don’t have much coin, do you? I’ll take your job for dirt cheap.”

“You will, will you? Aren’t you just saying that because you can’t get any other work?” Erin sighed, disinterested. “There’s no point in talking to a drunk, Note. He could just be messing with us. Let’s go ask other thieves for more intel.”

“Whoa there, lass,” the man interjected. “Don’t you think that’s a little harsh on the guy who just offered to do you a favor?”

“Unfortunately, we need a first-rate thief. If you want cheap work, look elsewhere. Let’s go, Note.”

She grabbed me by the sleeve and tried to steer us out the door. I was hesitant to follow, however, and dragged my feet.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Ignoring her, I turned back to the talkative thief. “Can I ask something?”

“Hmm? What is it, lad?”

“How do you know we don’t have money?”

“Huh?” His eyes widened as though he didn’t understand my question.

I organized my thoughts and explained. “Well, if you judged just based on our equipment, you should’ve pegged us for successful adventurers. She clearly has an expensive staff, and even if you didn’t know anything about mage gear, you’re a fellow thief. You should’ve been able to tell the quality of my dagger.”

“Isn’t he just too drunk to look closely?” Erin asked.

And she might’ve been right. Maybe I was just overthinking it.

“That’s one possibility,” I said. “But I get the feeling this man deduced that we’re broke based on our behavior rather than our appearance. It’s just a hunch, though.”

“Even so, what does it matter?”

“I can’t really explain it, but I don’t think this guy’s as drunk as he looks.”

“Oho...” The man gave me an impressed look.

Then and there, I came to an important decision. “Would you be willing to accept our job after all?” I asked.

“Are you serious?” Erin asked in turn, stupefied.

I knew entrusting the fate of a party member to this suspicious thief was a gamble, but it wasn’t a completely blind one. I had my reasons.

“This guy’s probably the strongest thief here based on what Enemy Search is telling me.”

“I see...”

After hearing me out, Erin understood. We’d known each other for a long time now. She trusted me at least that much.

“Well, aren’t you an interesting visitor?” The man smirked, plugging the cork on his bottle. He then stashed it in an item bag concealed on his person and turned away. “We can’t really talk here, so let’s relocate.”

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The thief we’d encountered at the guild appeared to be in his late thirties. He had short hair and was dressed in ragged clothes. After agreeing to talk more,

he led us out into a deserted alley.

“Come to think of it, I haven’t introduced myself yet,” he said. “I’m Suiz Myran, the thief you’re looking for, I believe.”

“Huh?!” Erin gasped in surprise from where she stood beside me.

I was the one who’d decided to hire the guy, and even I was a little shocked by that declaration. “You said you didn’t know Suiz Myran...”

“I never said I didn’t know him. I just dodged the question and you assumed the rest.”

Thinking back on it, he *had* said that he wasn’t sure how to answer. Then he’d started talking about how mysterious Suiz Myran was, leading us to assume that he had no personal connection.

Erin wasn’t satisfied with this. “Why would you be so deceitful?” she pressed him.

“Deceitful, huh? I guess that’s fair. It’s got to do with the rules I’ve set for accepting jobs.”

“You have rules for accepting jobs?” I asked. He’d mentioned earlier that Suiz Myran was choosy about his work, so if this guy was the real deal, then that checked out.

“That’s right. I don’t take jobs for the coin. It doesn’t hurt to have money, but having more isn’t necessarily better.”

“On what basis *do* you accept jobs, then?”

“Nothing complicated. My rule for taking a job is simple—I have to find it interesting.” The self-proclaimed Suiz Myran smiled. “I only do work I find interesting. We only get one life, you know? I believe in making the most of it. That’s why I’m an adventurer specializing in a battle style that attracts all kinds of requests. What about yourself?” he asked me.

There was no sign of the drunk from earlier—only a lone adventurer with a sharp gaze. This had to be the real Suiz Myran. I didn’t have any solid proof, but his overflowing aura had me fully convinced.



“I’ve never measured things in terms of how interesting they are...” I admitted.

“I see. Well, you’re free to live your way. You can set your own rules, but for me, things have to be interesting. That’s how I’ve lived the past thirty-odd years, and I gained myself a reputation as this country’s best thief in spite of it. Life sure is unpredictable,” Suiz said with a sigh.

Erin seemed to have gotten left behind in the conversation. “What does that have to do with why you tricked us?” she asked.

“Whoops, derailed again. My bad.” Suiz waved his hand, bobbing his head lightly a few times. “It’s easy to say I only accept interesting work—but finding it is actually pretty difficult. I became something of a celebrity for it, after all. People’d come to me with all sorts of hidden agendas, but the cloak-and-dagger stuff is all so drab.”

“That’s why you hide your identity as Suiz Myran.”

“That’s right. When people think I’m a low-rank adventurer, they’re real with me. Just like the lass here.”

“Urk...” Erin winced, having unwittingly proven his point.

People naturally judged books by their covers. There was no changing that. Without *Enemy Search* to clue me in, I might’ve reacted the same way Erin had.

“In that regard, you passed the test. You’re interesting, and interesting people tend to have interesting job requests. So count me in.” With that, the man turned to me and asked, “What’s your name, lad?”

“I’m Note Athlon.”

“Oh?” He nodded as though he’d come to some sort of sage understanding.

“Is there something about my name?” I asked.

“Not your name. You’re the real Note Athlon, aren’t you?”

“It’s the only name I’ve known since I was born, so I’d hope so. Is it a common name in Aifan?”

“You’re geared like a thief, and your presence is... No doubt about it. You’re

the guy I'm thinking of."

"Just so you know, this is my first time in the country," I clarified.

We were about to make a huge commotion in Aifan, but we hadn't done anything as of yet. And I'd certainly never met Suiz Myran before. There was no way he knew who I was.

"You're Note Athlon of the Arrivers, aren't you?"

"That's right."

Okay, so he *did* know me. The surprise must have been showing on my face.

"You look like you're wondering how I know that," Suiz remarked.

"I am. So how do you?"

"I'm not a well-known thief for nothing," he said with a shrug. "I've memorized info on famous adventurers around the world. Haven't you?"

He was looking for solidarity, but I couldn't exactly relate. I'd had no idea who he was until Riece told me about him, and I was even more oblivious about other famous adventurers. I generally had no interest in anything outside of the dungeon. Eisha, the top-tier thief who worked under the Headhunter, also kept track of notable figures... That probably made me a third-rate hack. I didn't know what normal thieves did.

"Honestly, I'm not well informed in that area," I said with a vague shake of my head.

That aside, I was intrigued to find out that the Arrivers were known abroad. Although we'd currently been surpassed by other parties, we were once the leaders of the Dungeon of Puriff. We'd spent so long dungeoneering that I'd kinda forgotten that. The Arrivers were one of the strongest parties in our country.

"So if he's Note Athlon, does that make you Erin the mage, lass?"

"You know me too?!"

It was now Erin's turn to be shocked. She was a hundred times stronger than me, so I took her renown for a given. It sure blew her away, though.

“Naturally,” said Suiz. “Izaar’s Seventh Sage Selection is one of the greatest magic events of the world. Everyone knows the mage who destroyed the competition and then walked away from it all.”

“I’m world-famous...?”

Her face was equal parts confusion, embarrassment, and happiness. It was a truly unique expression.

“So, what do two big shots like you need to ask of me?” Suiz inquired.

I didn’t consider myself a big shot, but it was indeed time to get down to business. I told Suiz about how Neme had been kidnapped in a sudden ambush, then shared what little information we knew about her captors.

After I finished, Suiz nodded with a profound look. “Fuge, huh? Another big shot...”

“You know him too?” I asked.

“I’ve met him in person several times, and I’ve even taken on one of his requests. That was way back, though. Fuge himself is a bore, but the work was interesting. He has a good eye.”

Cardinal Fuge was technically our enemy. I was a little dubious about Suiz complimenting him in front of us, but that was just his style. He was consistent in judging people by how interesting they were.

“Well, that’s another story. Sure, I’ll take your job. If Fuge’s involved, then our opponent isn’t lacking. I’ll help you get your friend back.”

“Really?”

That was good news. It’d be reassuring to have the strongest thief on our side. Each of the Arrivers already had the strength of a one-man army. With our forces combined, even if we were facing an entire country, retrieving one comrade shouldn’t be that hard.

I started devising a plan in my head when Suiz interrupted, “That said, you guys sure picked a big guy to fight with.”

“Is Cardinal Fuge that big of a deal?” I asked.

“That’s an understatement. He’s the second highest power in this nation after the pope, you know? The current acting saint is under his control, and he has the pope’s trust too. In other words, he’s likely to be at the top himself in the future.”

“How is he in a fight?”

“Who knows? I doubt he’s weak, but he shouldn’t be a match against you dungeoneers in terms of physical strength. Instead, he has several strong knights and adventurers on par with you guys at his side. In that regard, he’s formidable.”

In other words, he was more like the Tyrant Princess Leyfa. Leyfa had her own strengths, but her greatest threat was the powerful subordinates under her control, like the famous war priest Gilbert and Seventh Sage Mille. But while Leyfa was just the black sheep of the royal family, Cardinal Fuge was an active power here in Aifan. The people under him would all be the best of the best, like a souped-up version of the Princess’s Legion.

“Besides, issues regarding the saint are kept highly confidential in Aifan. I’m on the up and up with pretty much everything, and not even I know much about Saint’s Authority.”

Huh. I’d heard mention of “the saint” around town, so I’d assumed the well-informed Suiz would know why Neme had been kidnapped. Apparently it was more secretive than that.

“For now, we should first investigate why they took the dwarf girl,” he suggested. “We can work on physically retrieving her afterward. From the sound of things, she’s not in immediate mortal danger.”

“I’ll leave the details up to you,” I agreed.

Honestly, we knew practically nothing about what was happening with Neme. It might be possible to get her back by force, but that wouldn’t solve the real root of the problem. Furthermore, I believed it was best to defer to Suiz, who was a far more experienced thief than me.

“Well then, your party will be on standby for the time being,” he instructed. “I’ll handle the investigation.”

“Are you sure you don’t need our help?”

“If anything, I’d prefer that you do nothing. It’s clear you’re not from around here at a single glance. If you run around like that, it won’t take long for Fuge to notice. It’s harder to investigate folks who have their guard up, even for me. You follow?”

I had to agree that keeping our heads down was a priority concern. A man in Fuge’s position could easily have us arrested on false charges. Our safest bet was to follow Suiz’s lead and bide our time.

“I’m with you,” I said. “And you’re sure you can handle this?”

“Of course. Who do you think I am?” Suiz grinned boldly.

With that kind of assurance from the strongest thief around, I figured it was safe to leave the investigation to him.

“Then I’ll head back to the hotel and let the other Arrivers know what’s going on.”

“Don’t get so comfy that you forget how to fight.”

“Roger that.”

Thus we gained an accomplice and a foothold in Operation Get Neme Back.

Deepening Mystery

After scoring the help of Suiz Myran, Erin and I returned to the hotel where our party was staying. We explained the situation to everyone, then settled in while we waited for Suiz to contact us. We all had dinner at the hotel restaurant before returning to our respective rooms. We'd rented two—one for the guys and one for the girls. Naturally, that meant Erin, Roslia, and Sofie were together, while I was with Force.

So, in a room way too spacious for just two people, he and I were presently lazing atop our beds. It was still too early to go to sleep. With nothing to do either, Erin came knocking at our door. Apparently Roslia and Sofie had gone to the hotel bath, so she'd gotten bored sitting around by herself.

I gotta say, those two are surprisingly close... They go out a lot together back home too.

Such thoughts passed through my mind as I let Erin inside. She'd just finished bathing herself, and she dove onto my bed with her hair still damp. Of course, since Force was in the room too, it wasn't awkward or anything.

As I sat on the bed watching Erin roll around, a question popped into my mind. "Come to think of it, how did Neme end up joining the Arrivers?"

Erin responded to me first. "What? Why're you asking about that all of a sudden?"

Of course, I wasn't just striking up a conversation. I was thinking about what Suiz had said earlier.

"For now, we should first investigate why they took the dwarf girl."

He seemed to think the reason Neme was taken could help lead us to her, so I was hoping that Force or Erin might know something about her past. That hadn't occurred to me until we were all sitting together... If Neme were with us too, it would've felt like old times back from when I first joined the Arrivers.

"You two knew her from before I joined, right?" I asked.

“Well, we were all in the same party together, yeah,” Erin replied.

“Hey, that’s right,” said Force. “Erin’s technically your senior member here, Note.”

“What do you mean by ‘technically’?!” she shouted. “I’m *definitely* his senior member!”

“Coulda fooled me.”

This scene took me back to the old days too. They used to bicker like this all the time—until Hurricane Roslia joined up and the power dynamics totally shifted, that is.

“I’ll admit that Note and I joined the party at around the same time, so I don’t know much about Neme’s past either.”

“I guess that means I know the most about her, huh? I am the senior-most member,” Force remarked.

“Could have fooled me,” Erin snarked.

“Show a little respect, will you? I’m your elder. Note’s always been polite, but you’ve sassed me from day one.”

“I’m not being polite until you *earn* my respect.”

“You little...” Force sighed tiredly.

Yeah, sassy was just Erin’s default mode... Not that I was about to say anything.

“Neme joined pretty early on, right?” I tried asking instead.

“She did. Jin and I founded the Arrivers, and she was our first real member.”

“I’ve heard that before, but it’s a shock to me every time...”

“Really? Things were rough back at the start.” Force looked up at the ceiling, reminiscing about days long gone by. “When Jin and I decided to start dungeon diving, we had a hell of a time getting people to join up.”

“That surprises me too.”

“Oh yeah? I hadn’t made a name for myself back then, and Jin was fresh out

of the underworld. Two unknown adventurers would have a hard enough time forming a normal party, and the standards for dungeon parties are much higher. We had to make a name for ourselves on the surface first.”

“But you had Superior Sword Mastery, didn’t you?”

“You’d think that would help, right? I sure thought so before we founded the party, but we just kept getting invitations from other parties. People were willing to add us to their rosters, but no one wanted to join ours.”

“How come? I would’ve been happy to join a party with you in it, Force.”

“That’s because you don’t think, Note. But it’s still nice to hear,” he chuckled. “You know how having just one or two strong members in a dungeon team isn’t enough to prevent a party wipe?”

“Yeah...”

“That’s why no one wants to join a dungeon diving party built around one ace. It’s easy enough to recruit for a single opening, but there are too many vacancies to fill in a new party. That’s really why they rarely pop up in Puriff.”

That was probably insight he’d only gained as the founder of a party himself. It was true that new dungeon diving parties were a rarity in Puriff. There were plenty who ran the dungeon for loot, but the number of teams seriously aiming to clear it was limited. The most recent attention-worthy addition had to be the Princess’s Legion, and they were a special case—an all-star lineup gathered by an eccentric princess who let money do the talking. In its own way, making a dream team from scratch had to have been a challenge too.

“Jin and I barely knew what to do with ourselves back then... We didn’t have a base or any funds, so we were trashing surface monsters just to make enough to scrape by. We were always talking about how we were never going to make it into the dungeon.”

“It’s hard to imagine Jin like that...” I muttered. The hardship must have brought him and Force closer. It had always seemed like they had a special bond within the Arrivers.

“Well, it was around then that Neme appeared,” Force continued.

“We’re finally getting to the point!” Erin stretched and sat up in bed.

Force glanced at her and continued. “Truth be told, I don’t know much about Neme’s past myself.”

“What, really?”

“She was in another dungeon party in Puriff before she joined the Arrivers. Things apparently didn’t go well with them, so she moved from team to team before settling with us. That’s pretty much all I know.”

“I can’t believe it... Doesn’t Neme talk about herself more than that?”

“Have you forgotten how shy she is?”

“Oh, yeah...”

“We could kind of have a proper conversation with her by the time you joined, Note, but she was really bad at first. Her communication skills were so abysmal that I honestly wouldn’t be surprised if her previous party kicked her out because of it. Jin and I both racked our brains over how to handle her—until finally Jin made some progress by baiting her with food.”

Jin... Where in the world did you get that idea? I considered him a rational guy, but every now and then, he sure did some wild and crazy things.

“That aside, Neme’s goal has always been to conquer the dungeon, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah. Even when we all went our separate ways, she formed a new party and kept dungeon diving without us.”

After Jin died and the Arrivers disbanded, Neme had gathered newbie adventurers together to create the Ultimate Invincible Partyz. I could still remember them all. Their abilities and achievements were nothing compared to the Arrivers, but they were still one of very few parties in Puriff that dared to take on dungeon conquest.

“Neme’s interested in the dungeon because she wants to meet God or something, right?” I asked.

“If she was telling the truth when she introduced herself, then yes,” Erin replied.

“Why’s she willing to go so far for that, though? I’m not a Cecinaist, so I don’t exactly get it.”

“Who knows? But if all Cecinaists were like that, then dungeon parties would be packed with them, wouldn’t they?”

“Good point. Maybe we could ask Roslia about it. She’s a Cecinaist too.”

“You really think so?” Erin asked skeptically. “Cecinaism teaches that you’re supposed to love one person all your life, so I don’t think a true Cecinaist would be an indulgent partywrecker like her.”

“Another good point...”

Just based on her past actions, it was hard to say Roslia was a devout Cecinaist. That was probably why she didn’t seem to care much about the dungeon’s supposedly divine origins. While I was contemplating that...

“Is Neme really a Cecinaist either?” Force asked, a pensive look on his face.

“Huh?” Erin responded, her brow furrowed. “She’s a priestess who just got kidnapped by a Cecinaist cardinal. Wouldn’t you say she’s a Cecinaist?”

“I mean, I thought so too, but what you said just now got me thinking. Neme’s always talking about being a ‘grown woman’ and how she ‘used to play around with lots of men,’ yeah?”

“You mean those obvious lies? What about them?”

“If Neme’s really a devout Cecinaist, would she lie about such impious things?”

“Huh...”

“You’re right...”

Erin and I were both caught off guard by Force’s point. Perhaps we’d had the wrong idea all along. As we pondered what this meant, a tense air filled the room.

“I guess maybe she’s not,” I said eventually. “If Neme were a true Cecinaist, she wouldn’t be so eager to lie about that kind of stuff. Dating multiple people is a sin in Cecinaism.”

“But hang on. Neme dresses like a Cecinaist priestess. How do you explain that?” Erin countered.

“Well...”

That stumped me. One of the reasons we’d assumed Neme was Cecinaist was because of her garb. If she believed in another religion, surely she wouldn’t wear the robes of a different faith.

“What if Neme *is* a Cecinaist, she’s just not really devout?”

“I don’t really get it, but that would explain things...”

I’d started asking about Neme’s past for hints, yet the mystery had only deepened. Perhaps this was the limit of what we could uncover by comparing the information we had.

“For now, let’s wait for Suiz’s report.”

“Right. We should also loop Roslia and Sofie in on all this. Maybe they’ll have some additional insight.”

“Sounds good.”

And so our dive into Neme’s past came to an end.

Neme Pargin, Saint Candidate

Neme Pargin was sitting on a bed in the room of Salengre Cathedral where she was being held captive. She wasn't allowed outside of it, so she found herself with nothing to do. The days she'd spent exploring the dungeon felt like the distant past now.

Why was she in Visril? She'd told herself she would only return to this town after she conquered the dungeon. Everyone was so selfish. Arcia, Cardinal Fuge, God—all of them. But perhaps she also appeared selfish in their eyes. Pondering this, Neme began daydreaming of a time before she joined Arrivers. Of her childhood, to be precise.

Neme was born in the outskirts of Visril, in what constituted the city slums. This was second-hand information to her, however, as she'd already been taken in by the Cecinaist church by the time she was old enough to understand anything. In the city of Visril, children who were separated from their parents due to death or other circumstances were left in its care. Neme didn't know what happened to her mother and father, but she was one of many orphans there. Visril did its best to raise the children because philanthropy was a Cecinaist virtue...but that wasn't the only reason.

Aifan was highly focused on the research of skills, specifically how to obtain particular skills from the presentation ceremony. How did God decide how to distribute them? It was a mystery, but there were three prevailing theories on the matter. The first was that a person's skills were actually determined at their birth—they were simply bestowed at the age of fifteen. The presentation ceremony merely revealed what was already set in stone. The second theory was that a person's skills were determined by their experiences after birth. That God decided which skills to bestow based on the abilities and aptitudes someone gained before the age of fifteen.

Then there was the third theory—that skills were decided at random at the

presentation ceremony. This posited the acquisition of skills as a kind of lottery. There was evidence that those who studied magic tended to receive magic skills and those who believed in Cecinaism tended to receive holy skills, so it did not entirely refute the second theory. It simply suggested that the outcome of a skill bestowal could not be predicted, hence many outlier cases.

Aifan collectively leaned toward a combination of the first and second theories, a combination of the second and third, or possibly a mix of all three. As the nation's research advanced, they required an immense amount of data on skill-receivers in order to better understand who was blessed with what. Orphaned children whose lives could be monitored and controlled made the perfect sample.

Neme was sorted into a group of orphans aiming to receive the Saint's Authority skill. Aifan had two preeminent positions: its pope and saint. If the pope stood at the top of the nation, then the saint was its symbol. This had all started centuries ago when Aifan was ravaged by war. A lone girl with Saint's Authority set out to bring peace to the land, and ever since, Aifan worshipped bearers of Saint's Authority as bringers of peace. Of course, an EX-rarity skill like Saint's Authority wasn't common. In times where there was no known bearer, an acting saint was chosen to serve the role. Acting saints were merely substitutes, however—stopgaps until the true saint arrived.

The vigor of the country was clearly different between periods with a Saint and periods with an acting saint, so Aifan was in constant search of the next bearer of Saint's Authority. The church Neme belonged to had around one hundred children ranging from four to fourteen years old, about ten in each age group. It was presumed that Saint's Authority was only granted to female bearers, and only to devout Cecinaists like the first saint. Thus the girls gathered at the church, known as saint candidates, were raised to live piously.

Now, while it sounded sinister to say that the church had only taken them in to cultivate a certain skill, life there was comfortable. Cecinaism's spirit of charity drove the operation. The girls had many rules to live by, but none of them were unreasonable. The nuns raising them treated them with love, and the girls loved them back. Furthermore, the saint candidates all admired the nation's symbol of peace. They spent their days living modestly in hopes of

becoming the saint themselves. Unlike the outside world, there was no bullying amongst the children of the church. They never fought over desserts, and they always shared their toys. They played with each other, enjoying everything in harmony. However, if asked what they thought of Neme back then, each and every saint candidate would have said the same thing—that she was a problem child.

“Are you sure? Thank you!” the young Neme said as she happily received a fruit tart from the girl sitting beside her. She’d been drooling over it.

For anyone training to become the next saint, offering food to the hungry was only natural. The girl beside Neme had acted out of piety. This wasn’t the first time someone had given Neme a dessert, however. She knew the other girls would offer them freely if she stared at their plates longingly, so this was more or less a daily habit of hers.

As she stuffed her cheeks with the tart, crumbs spilling everywhere, another girl appeared behind her.

“Neme! Are you eating other people’s desserts again?” she chided.

Neme turned around to see Arcia, a saint candidate from her age group.

“No! This tart is Neme’s now!” she shouted, defending her dessert and quickly swallowing what was in her mouth.

Arcia observed Neme and her unsaintly appetite as she placed her hands on her hips. “You know I’m not trying to take your dessert!”

“Then what do you want?” Neme asked.

“I was worried you were taking others’ again, so I came over to check. And it looks like I was right.”

“Neme didn’t take it! It was given to Neme! Don’t make Neme the baddie!”



The girl who'd offered Neme her dessert nodded quietly. Of course, Arcia knew that Neme hadn't stolen it by force. Rather, she was taking advantage of other girls' kindness. Such dishonesty was rampant in the outside world, but it was a rare sight at church—which only made Neme's offenses stand out all the more.

Arcia looked away from Neme and handed her own tart to the girl who'd shared hers. "Here. For the dessert you gave Neme."

"Thank you, Arcia." She accepted the tart with gratitude.

Arcia grinned shyly. "Don't mention it. Any Cecinaist would do the same thing."

"You're amazing, Arcia. You're just as kind as a real saint."

"I still have a long way to go."

Arcia responded with humility, but the nuns and other candidates all believed she was worthy of becoming the next saint. She had a warm personality and a caring heart. She never gave up on anyone, not even Neme. Instead, Arcia treated her like a friend while gently correcting her bad habits. On top of that, Arcia had the best grades and holy art abilities. Everyone heralded her as the next saint, yet she never boasted about herself. She scarcely had a fault to criticize.

"If you're going to give your tart away, please give it to Neme!"

On the other hand, her close friend Neme demonstrated a self-centeredness that was far from holy. Not even Arcia could hide her exasperation.

"You sure? You won't become the saint that way," she said.

"Neme knows!"

"So why—"

"Neme's fine not being the saint!" she declared proudly. "Neme is happy with the way things are now, eating lots of desserts and being surrounded by nice people who share their desserts! So Neme doesn't need to be the saint!"

"You're basically saying you just want to eat desserts..." the girl sitting next to

Neme mumbled.

The girls didn't lack for food because they were being trained to become the next saint. The problem was candidates who didn't take their role seriously, which was how Neme had earned herself a reputation as a problem child.

Arcia warned Neme about her blasé attitude. "You can't say things like that."

"Why not?"

"The nuns will get mad."

"That's okay! They already got mad during prayer time today!"

"What...?" Both Arcia and the girl sitting beside Neme were puzzled by her reply.

"Neme prayed really hard to God for lots of desserts, and the nuns got mad at me for some reason!"

"You're supposed to pray for peace, succor for the poor, and other such benevolent things. Of course they'd scold you for praying to satisfy your own greed!"

"Is that so?"

Not even the nuns' admonishments had any effect on Neme, so Arcia was wasting her breath. Neme's disposition was well known within the church. The only reason she hadn't been expelled was because the church believed in being charitable.

Seeing Neme's absolute lack of remorse, Arcia changed her approach. "Either way, you'll get fat if you eat so many desserts."

"Eek!" Neme's eyes went wide. The threat of gaining weight was far more dreadful to her than the idea of not being able to become the saint—and she was the only candidate who felt that way. "No, no... Neme's still young, so Neme won't get fat."

"Really? Your cheeks are already chubbier than anyone else's."

"That's because Neme is a dwarf! Probably..." she argued, uncertainty creeping into her voice at the end because she *had* been putting on weight

every year. She thought she was just growing, but her unchanging height called that into question.

“If you’re not sure, you should stop taking desserts from the other girls.” Arcia advised Neme to reconsider her lifestyle.

But if Neme were repentant, she never would have been considered a problem child in the first place...

“Neme has a separate stomach for dessert! But to make up for all the desserts, Neme will cut back on the vegetables!”

Instead of reflecting, Arcia’s words had an opposite effect on her. Thus she continued to say and do as she pleased—proof that life at the church was peaceful. The young Neme was happy to be a saint candidate.

*

The ten years after Neme was brought to the church passed rapidly. Now that she was fifteen, she and Arcia were staring down the eve of their presentation ceremony. Many of the girls raised as saint candidates were abandoned by their parents. Their exact birthdays were unknown, so children of the same age range were gathered to perform the ceremony all at once when the time seemed right. Between them all, a restless air hung over the church the night before.

For saint candidates, the presentation ceremony was a major event that would change their lives. It was the moment that decided whether their pious lives were enough to earn Saint’s Authority. If so, it would gratify everything they’d done. Conversely, if not, it would mean it had all been for naught. The younger girls were heavily invested in the event as well. EX-rarity skills could only manifest in one person at a time, so if an older candidate received Saint’s Authority, it would bring their careers as saint candidates to an end. They would lose their relevance.

On the high-tension night before the mass presentation ceremony, Neme was reading alone in her room. Of course, she wasn’t reading to calm her nerves like the other children. She had no interest in becoming the saint to begin with, so she’d completely forgotten that the ceremony was swiftly approaching. The other girls were all acting strangely, so she was simply killing time alone.

The church was a facility dedicated to raising modest, saintly girls. The number of recreational activities they were allowed was limited, but reading was one of the few approved forms of entertainment. Their content, however, was carefully restricted. Naturally, anything that went against the teachings of Cecinaism was taboo. The book Neme had in her hands was a romance novel for adults—one she'd picked with an innocent cover and snuck past the nuns' inspections.

"Are you reading indecent literature again?" someone asked Neme from behind her.

She slammed her book shut, thinking it was a nun...but she turned around to see Arcia instead.

"Oh, it's just you..."

"Hey, isn't that a little mean?"

"Neme was just scared. I thought you were one of the nuns."

"I see..." Arcia nodded in understanding.

Neme sat up to look at her. "Besides, you're the one being mean. Don't call other people's books indecent."

"But it is, isn't it? It's one of *those* books, no?"

"It's not! This is an adult romance novel! The main character Josephene is in a rut with her husband when she meets her childhood friend and first love again! She becomes a maiden in love all over! It's a forbidden extramarital love!"

"What kind of accursed story are you reading...?"

Infidelity was a sin to Cecinaists, but Neme was a teenage girl who couldn't help being enthralled with taboo love stories like that.

"Neme wants to have a forbidden romance as well!"

Of course, the model saint candidate Arcia couldn't understand Neme's mind. Yet in spite of everything, she always had to give Neme the benefit of the doubt. That was one reason they'd become friends over the years.

"If one of the nuns finds that book, they'll confiscate it," she warned the

dwarf.

“That’s okay! Neme always hides it under the next bed, so no one will know!”

“That’s totally not okay...”

Neme was a repeat offender, so the nuns had learned to check under her bed for forbidden goods, and Neme had in turn learned to hide them elsewhere. Even Arcia had to say something about that.

“If you keep behaving this way, you won’t receive a good skill,” she warned.

“Neme doesn’t need the saint’s skill!”

“I don’t just mean that. What if you receive a useless one? You won’t be able to make money to buy any desserts.”

“Not to worry!” Neme thumped her chest. “You’ll become the saint! Then you’ll have more desserts than you know what to do with, and Neme will help you eat them!”

Neme fully intended to leech off Arcia. Like everyone else at the church, she never doubted that Arcia would become the next saint.

“There’s no guarantee I’ll get Saint’s Authority,” she said. “And if I do, I doubt it comes with dessert.”

“Yeah, right!”

Neme patted her friend’s shoulder, certain she was just being humble. Her carefree reassurance seemed to make Arcia uneasy, though.

“Neme, have you actually given your future outside of the church any thought?” she asked.

“Who do you think Neme is? Of course I have!”

“I’m glad.”

“Neme’s going to live off of Arcia!”

“I take it back...” Arcia was briefly rendered speechless by that answer. “That’s no good, Neme. You have to be independent and work for yourself.”

“No! Neme doesn’t want to work! Neme will depend on Arcia!”

“Work aside, shouldn’t the decision to support you be up to me?”

“You mean...you’re going to abandon Neme?” She paled as though the thought had never crossed her mind. “Neme shouldn’t be the one saying this, but there’s no way Neme can work! Neme’s bad at studying, clumsy, and will die immediately if left alone!”

“That’s not true! You could be an adventurer. Your holy arts are coming along wonderfully.”

Even if they didn’t receive Saint’s Authority, most saint candidates received a skill pertaining to holy arts. The majority of the candidates either remained at the church to work as nuns or went out into the world to become healers.

Neme snorted. “Neme definitely doesn’t want to be an adventurer. It’s tiring, and charging headfirst into danger is stupid.”

“I think it’s really admirable to fight monsters to help other people, though...”

“There are lots of adventurers who don’t do that! What about dungeon adventurers?”

There was no dungeon in Aifan, but Neme had heard tales of people who explored their unknown depths. Finding a hoard of treasure could fund her dessert habit, of course, but living such a risky life would outweigh the benefits. Adventuring was at the very bottom of the list of jobs Neme had considered.

“It’s true that there are some who don’t work to help people, but the information and technology obtained from the dungeons can better our lives as well, you know? I still think it’s a respectable occupation...”

“You think too much.”

Neme didn’t quite understand the concept of doing something for the good of humanity. Arcia had known her long enough to appreciate that, so she decided a change of topic would be best.

“Ah, yes, that’s right. I just remembered why I came to see you,” she said.

“What is it?” Neme asked.

“You haven’t prayed today, have you?”

“Huh? Didn’t the nuns say there was no prayer time today?”

“I knew it. You weren’t listening properly.” A tired expression crossed Arcia’s face. “Today’s the eve of the presentation ceremony, so there’s no prayer time together. Instead, we’re all supposed to enter the prayer room alone to offer up one last prayer to God.”

“Really? Thank you for telling Neme!”

Although Neme was the church’s problem child, she was still a Cecinaist. She believed in God and she took her prayers seriously—they just happened to be different from everyone else’s. The nuns still got mad at her when she asked for things like dessert.

“Neme’s going to go pray right away!”

“Everyone else should be done by now, so the room should be free.”

“Neme knew she could count on you, Arcia!”

After giving her thanks, Neme hurried off to the prayer room.

That night was the first time Neme ever went to the prayer room alone. The room was normally full of nuns and other saint candidates, so she’d never noticed it before, but there was a mysterious reverence to the place. Part of that was attributable to the sheer size of the room, but another part was likely because of the statue of God enshrined at the back. Even the impious Neme found herself standing bolt upright with bated breath.

For now, she made her way to the statue and assumed a praying posture. Just as she was about to make her usual prayer for endless desserts, she paused. Arcia’s words flashed through her mind. Neme had completely forgotten that the presentation ceremony was tomorrow. Once it was over, their time as saint candidates would be too. Girls who didn’t inherit the sainthood typically left the church. There were some who remained as nuns to raise other children, but Neme knew she was considered a problem child.

“It’s the end of the road for Neme...”

When she looked back on it, life at the church had been nothing but fun. Arcia and her other friends were all kind to her. They never abandoned her for being

useless and they always treated her like one of them. The sisters often scolded Neme, but she knew it was because they cared about her. They'd always follow up their admonishments with a warm hug. Their cooking was delicious, and they even made sure to buy books for Neme too. She didn't know much about the outside world, but if heaven existed, she thought it would probably be something like this.

Everyone else at the church prayed for world peace, but Neme was happy just living there. Still, that life would come to an end tomorrow. No matter how much she whined, it wouldn't change anything. So instead, Neme's heart was filled with gratitude. For the nuns who raised her, the priests running the church, the older candidates who taught her things, the younger candidates who looked up to her, and her friends who'd been nice to her. Out of everyone, she was most grateful to Arcia.

Arcia had been the first person to talk to Neme when she moved to the church and was struggling to fit in. The two girls had naturally begun chatting more and more as they saw each other, and before Neme knew it, Arcia was her best friend. Arcia was beloved by everyone at the church. Yet in spite of that, she cared the most about a problem child like Neme—she was just that kind. Arcia was always giving Neme gentle warnings and guidance, and she'd saved her from a good scolding more times than anyone could count. Neme loved Arcia for that.

As the person closest to Arcia, Neme knew just how hard she was working to become the next saint. It was Arcia's greatest aspiration, and she was willing to put in the effort to get there. Her grades and her mastery of holy arts hadn't always been the best. She started off around average. But for the sake of becoming the saint, she would ask the nuns and older candidates about things she didn't understand—even going as far as to sacrifice sleep to study up. Neme respected her for that, and she wanted Arcia's hard work to be rewarded. So tonight, instead of praying for more desserts for herself, Neme decided to make a different wish.

“Dear God, please make Arcia the saint.”

This wasn't because Neme wanted to mooch desserts off of Saint Arcia either. She sincerely, from the bottom of her heart, wanted Arcia to be happy.

“Neme’s seen how hard she works. She’s done her very best.”

With her hands firmly clutched together, she prayed, “You must have seen it too, God. So please give Arcia the skill to become the saint.”

Neme’s prayer would never come true. Years later, she knew that all too well—even while dreaming. By some mistake, she’d been granted Saint’s Authority instead. If no one had received the holy skill, Arcia failing to inherit it may have been written off as a case of bad luck. But rather, it was specifically given to Neme—the church’s problem child.

Neme hadn’t spoken to Arcia after the presentation ceremony. She was in too much shock and didn’t know what to say. Arcia was still processing her own emotions and had simply stared at Neme coldly from afar. That was when Neme realized it.

God was real—but not the kind, gentle being the church made them out to be. God was cruel, and Neme was angry. She would never forgive God for hurting her best friend. Even though she’d obtained Saint’s Authority, God hadn’t spoken to her...so Neme decided she was going to have to go complain to God directly. She’d once heard the rumor that if you reached the end of a dungeon, you could have a divine meeting.

Unable to sit still, Neme had walked away from the sainthood and fled Aifan. She eventually found herself in Puriff, where she met the Arrivers. She traveled to an unfamiliar land, learned to communicate with others outside of her cloistered lifestyle, and worked her hardest every day—all so she could meet God. It wasn’t because she was a Cecinaist. She just wanted her objections to be heard. Why had she received the Saint’s Authority? Why wasn’t it Arcia?

If possible, Neme wanted to give her skill to Arcia. If God was the one who bestowed skills, transferring them should be easy. And Neme wouldn’t take no for an answer. *That* was the sole reason she was intent on dungeon conquest.

Blitz Tactics

I sat with the other Arrivers at the hotel, listening to Suiz's report.

"...And that sums it up," he concluded.

After hearing about the saint candidates, we were all speechless. It was a surprise to hear that Aifan was using orphaned children to farm desired skills, and it was a bigger surprise to hear Neme had been one of them.

The whole system struck outsiders like us as weird, but it was apparently considered normal in these parts. There weren't many countries in the world that would take in orphans en masse, and I had no doubt that they'd saved plenty of kids that way... I just wasn't convinced that it was exactly ethical. That said, the saint candidate system was apparently halted after Neme obtained Saint's Authority, so I figured it was a moot point. The church was still taking care of orphans, and I didn't see a problem with that.

However, according to Suiz's intel, Neme had refused to become the saint and subsequently left the church. She'd then later turned up in Puriff and gotten into dungeoneering. Suiz hadn't dug into her personal reasons for leaving, but I knew it must have taken a tremendous amount of determination for a shy girl like her to run away from home and start a new life in a faraway place.

On top of that, we Arrivers knew just how passionate Neme was about conquering the dungeon. Even when the party disbanded, she was the only one who didn't give up on her dream. Her methods weren't entirely realistic, I'll admit, but she'd gathered new comrades on her own and kept dungeon diving. Her ardor was almost an obsession. I wasn't sure where that motivation came from, but I was mad at Cardinal Fuge and Acting Saint Arcia for getting in her way.

"Thanks, Suiz," I said. "I'm surprised you were able to gather so much information in such a short amount of time."

"Gotta live up to my reputation, you know."

“How do you even get that kind of intel?”

“That’s a trade secret.” Suiz lifted his index finger and gave me a silly wink before instantly switching to a serious expression. “Now, here’s the big part...”

“Everything until now has sounded pretty big, honestly.”

“This is the biggest. In short, it concerns our plan to retrieve Neme Pargin.”

At those words, the Arrivers all tensed up. We were finally making progress toward getting Neme back.

“There’s one thing that needs to be taken into account for us to do this,” warned Suiz. “It’s about Acting Saint Arcia’s skill.”

“Her skill?” Was it that powerful? Stronger than Erin’s or Force’s? I had to wonder.

“It’s called Greater Far Sight,” he explained. “It’s the superior version of the Far Sight skill.”

I wasn’t sure what Suiz was getting at here. What was so special about that skill? Erin looked every bit as puzzled as I was.

Seeing this, Suiz continued, “All the skill does is allow its bearer to see extraordinary distances—but you need to consider that you’re all being tracked with it.”

“What?!” Erin and Roslia both yelled in shock. The rest of us were just as surprised.

“It’s safe to assume that’s how they had you all marked in Puriff,” said Suiz.

“No wonder...” Force nodded sagely.

That explained the timing of their attack at HQ—specifically while I, the Arriver’s Enemy Search user, was in the dungeon. I had failed to notice their presences before the attack too because they’d made sure to stay out of my detection range.

“This means they know you’ve made contact with me, Suiz Myran. And that we’re holding a strategy meeting in this hotel room,” Suiz continued.

“Really?!” Erin whipped her head around to get a look at our surroundings.

Suiz raised a hand to stop her. “Whoa there, don’t give us away. They don’t know we’re aware of Greater Far Sight yet.”

“Right...” Erin mumbled, looking back at Suiz.

“Greater Far Sight can only *see* distant things. It doesn’t convey voices or reveal what we’re saying. They’ll be none the wiser about our discussion so long as we stick to talking, so just stay calm.”

That was one small mercy, at least. It was a tough break that the enemy knew we were in town, but if they could hear the details of our rescue plan too, we’d be utterly powerless against Cardinal Fuge.

“So, what do we do?” Erin asked. “The church knows we’re here to get Neme back, right? We’re in trouble if they shore up their defenses.”

Erin had a good point. We were up against Aifan’s top brass. We couldn’t engage in a direct confrontation. Our only hope was to catch them by surprise—and that apparently wasn’t happening.

As we pondered our options, Suiz continued, “The situation isn’t *all* bad. Think of it this way—if Arcia has kept a constant eye on you guys, she knows that you don’t have anything up your sleeve. This means they haven’t prepared any counter security yet either.”

“I see.”

Even if Cardinal Fuge was the most important man in the country, keeping someone under maximum security around the clock wasn’t easy. Guards were expensive, and concentrating too many of them in one place left other locations vulnerable. He had Greater Far Sight on his side to keep tabs on our movements, so there was no need to bother initiating countermeasures until we made a move in the first place. In fact, when I checked out the Salengre Cathedral with Enemy Search, the security around Neme hadn’t seemed particularly tight.

“Then we should hurry up and do something,” the impatient Erin suggested.

Suiz nodded. “The lass is right. Right this moment, preferably.”

“Wait, *right now*?” Roslia asked. Her confusion was understandable. None of

us had expected to go for it immediately.

“You look surprised, but yes. The enemy is on their toes too, so we have to take the initiative.”

“But we haven’t prepared anything,” I protested.

“Neither have they. The second we show any sign of getting ready, the real fight begins. And they know we’re having a strategy meeting right now...so you can count on more guards starting tomorrow.”

“So you’re saying our best bet is acting today?”

“That’s right.”

Was this our only chance? I didn’t like the idea of going to rescue Neme without a plan...but when I thought about it, the Arrivers usually played things by ear anyway. Dungeon conquest was a battle against the unknown. There were times where advance preparations meant nothing, and those were the times the Arrivers’ raw talent carried us through. I was the kind of guy to solve things with meticulous planning, so maybe I was just worrying too much. Time was constantly ticking. The situation would only worsen while we sat around wringing our hands. There are times in life when not making a decision is a decision in itself.

“I understand,” I said. “Let’s do this. Now.”

“Very nice. Now we’re talking.” Suiz clapped his hands together. “Fortunately, we have a Mapping scout on our side. We know everything about the cathedral’s layout. You can even see hidden passageways around there, can’t you?”

“Well, yeah, a few...”

The city of Visril had been built up as a mountain fortress by Aifan’s hero, Forge Maltaios. Its roads were already complicated enough, but there were caves and underground tunnels everywhere too. There were also lots of alleyways and such that had fallen out of use after the expansion.

“I don’t think it’ll be that hard to get to Neme,” I volunteered. “But we need to do something about Greater Far Sight or the whole operation will be blown.”

“That isn’t a problem. Greater Far Sight isn’t almighty,” Suiz offered in return. He then shared what he knew about the skill. “First, Greater Far Sight can only ‘see’ one thing at a time. So if you split up into two groups, she can only follow one of you. And the one she’s most likely to target is Note, who has specialized abilities for infiltration.”

“So while she’s watching me with Greater Far Sight, she can’t follow everyone else...”

“That’s right. Greater Far Sight is a skill that allows you to see into the distance either by designating a particular point or projecting her field of view. Even if she marks you, she has to be able to *see* you.”

“In that case, is it possible to shake her mark?”

“By outrunning it, you mean? I suppose it’s not impossible if you can move at a speed faster than Greater Far Sight can follow, but the easiest is to turn invisible.” With that, Suiz turned to look at Erin. “So, Miss Mage, can you use invisibility magic?”

“It’s not out of the question.”

During her training at the magic city of Izaar, Erin had learned all kinds of spells. Apparently one of them was invisibility, even though it didn’t have much use inside the dungeon.

“If invisibility works, then Stealth should have an effect too,” I said.

I couldn’t completely erase my presence like the Headhunter, but I could at least make myself harder to spot. If I used Stealth in conjunction with Shadow Runner, a high movement speed art, I should effectively be able to disappear from sight.

“Wait a minute,” Erin said, mulling over something. “I know an easier way to shake Greater Far Sight with magic.”

“Some other spell?” I asked.

“You know the one, Note. If she has to see someone with Greater Far Sight, then what if they just warp away?”

“Warp, as in...?”

“I could teleport you with Gate.”

Gate was a highly advanced spatial magic spell that connected two points instantaneously. Erin had defeated her final opponent in the Seventh Sage Selection, Eskar Burnout, by using his own signature version—Transfer Zone—against him. She’d picked Gate up in the process of learning that. Honestly, Erin was a fearsome mage...although I wouldn’t expect anything less from an Arriver.

“Unlike Transfer Zone, Gate can be used on people,” she explained. “There’s rarely time to use it in battle, but it might come in handy in a situation like this.”

“Excellent, Erin!”

Her Gate was the best bet we had for Operation Rescue Neme, so we spent what little time we had left finalizing a plan and getting to work.

The Strongest Thief

We split into three groups to go save Neme. The first was Suiz and myself—the infiltration team. Our goal was simple: traverse the underground tunnels, enter the church, and retrieve Neme. A covert mission like this was perfect for two thieves. We weren't the strongest fighters of the group, but we were going for maximum stealth. The break-in would be easy enough. The problem was getting out. I could probably shake Greater Far Sight with Shadow Runner on the way in, but the moment we reached Neme, our position would be as good as given away to the enemy. I'd also have to carry her on the way back, potentially compromising my speed against Greater Far Sight.

That was where the transfer team, Erin and Force, came in. After we left the hotel, they were going to pack up our things and leave the city under the cover of an invisibility spell. When the time came, Erin would activate Gate—the companion point of which she was storing in my glove—and transport us to their location.

That left our third and final team. Truth be told, if the enemy focused all of their attention on me and Suiz, it would make the infiltration a lot harder. So our decoys, Roslia and Sofie, were going to make a commotion elsewhere in the church. Since we were deploying them as a distraction, we'd have to pick them up with Gate too. That made the escape plan a little riskier, but fortunately, I could keep track of their position with Enemy Search. It shouldn't be too hard to rendezvous, so after weighing the pros and cons, this was the plan we'd decided to go with.

Force had personally wanted revenge on Cardinal Fuge, but we had to avoid direct combat for this plan to work, so he was sitting the action out as part of the Gate team this time. Apparently the church had priests who could use magic to intensify curses—in other words, they were Force's worst nightmare now that he only had Purgatory. He was disappointed to be denied his revenge for now, but he had to make do with guarding Erin. That was an important job in itself.

“Here you go,” Erin said, offering my gloves back.

No matter how much we wanted to keep our preparations from Arcia’s prying eyes, we needed the bare minimum to make this plan work. The Gate trap in my glove was part of that. The other Arrivers were spending the evening as they pleased, and Suiz had gone outside to wait by our infiltration point to the church. Basically, we were just waiting on this.

“We’re up against people this time, so I modified my magic a little,” Erin explained.

“You’re so thoughtful,” I told her.

“Well, I didn’t want anyone to end up dead.”

“Fair enough.”

The incredible defenses of dungeon monsters took some serious magic to penetrate, so it made sense for Erin to swap to something more appropriate against human opponents. That said, one of my gloves was already taken up with the Gate trap, so I was curious what she’d done with the other.

“Now, the spell set in your right glove is...”

After hearing her explanation, I accepted the gloves back from her and thanked her.

“I’m just doing what I always do,” she replied.

“And I’m always grateful.”

“I know that. Just make sure you get Neme back.”

“I know that.”

After some light banter, I stuffed my gloves in my pocket and left the room.

*

“Thanks for waiting for me,” I said as I met up with Suiz in the dim alleyway. Things would move quickly from here.

“You ready?” he asked.

“Yup.” I put on my gloves and braced myself. The fight was on now. Erin and

the others were already on the move. “Let’s go.”

Guiding us through the underground tunnels was my job with Mapping. We descended into the sewer way and followed along the walls until we reached the tunnels. They were safe to move through, so we ran as fast as we could.

“Mapping sure is a convenient skill, huh?” Suiz remarked as he kept pace beside me.

“Really?”

“Well, yeah. If you wanted to infiltrate the church, you’d normally have to spend ages puzzling over how to get in. But you found a route instantly.”

“The two-slot skill Area Map could’ve done as much.”

“Even so,” said Suiz, holding up the magic artifact he was using for a lantern, “you can run in this darkness without a light thanks to Mapping, right?”

“Well, yeah. If I know the terrain, I can move without being able to see at all.”

“Is that something anyone with Mapping can do?”

“I’m not sure, but I’m guessing so with enough practice.”

The only other Mapping holder I knew was Courie from Labyrinth Knights, and he could use the skill much more effectively than me. A genius like him could surely pick it up, so I didn’t think it was anything that special.

“If I didn’t have this light, wouldn’t you be able to avoid Arcia’s Greater Far Sight just by running through the darkness?”

“Maybe, but I’m not interested in raiding the enemy’s base alone. I’m more comfortable with you here, Suiz.”

The underground tunnel we were in continued straight to Salengre Cathedral, but it didn’t go straight to Neme’s room. We’d be coming out on the church grounds, entering the main building, sneaking through a hidden passageway, and then heading for the sanctuary in the back.

“There are guards by the main building,” I said. “I’ll need to leave them to you.”

“So you say, but couldn’t you handle them by yourself?” Suiz replied.

“No way, no how.”

My main form of attack was Spell Shot, and my ammunition for that was limited. I had a rare style of fighting for an adventurer—one not meant for continuous battles. I had to avoid tangling with the larger groups of guards. If I were to compare myself to another thief, I’d probably pick Eisha, another spellcasting thief. I’d stolen most of my techniques from her, though, so that sort of went without saying.

“We’re almost there,” I warned Suiz.

Before long, we’d arrived directly below Salengre Cathedral. There was a large hole above our heads that connected to the fountain drain in the back garden of the church.

“This is it, huh?” he said. “I’ll be back in a bit, I guess.”

He made a soaring leap, using Climb to pull himself up with one hand while still carrying his magic light in the other. I used the same art to scale the wall and exit out of the drain after him.

“Now it’s time for me to actually contribute...” Suiz muttered as he began stretching.

The enemy was waiting just up ahead. We should have outrun Greater Far Sight in our flight down the tunnel, so they didn’t know our exact location—but a fight with the guards was inevitable.

“Here I go!”

Once we stepped out into the open, Suiz made another incredible leap, this time straight up. He changed direction midair, then disappeared like a flash of lightning.

“That was *fast!*”

What was that? Some kind of art? He was moving as fast as Jin’s Shadow Runner—maybe even faster. No wonder he was known as the strongest thief.

“Shadow Runner.”

I’d fall behind if I ran normally, so I activated an art of my own and gave chase. By the time I caught up, there were three guards on the ground.

“Huh?!”

Under the moonlit sky, a bolt of light was zipping about the church yard. No, it wasn't a light... It was Suiz Myran.



“This is called Light Blink, Note! Though I guess you can’t hear me anymore!”

The light shot straight for the soldiers and then hooked, dropping an entire group of guards on the spot. It continued to zig and zag, felling guards left and right.

“An acceleration art for linear movement, I’m guessing...” I mused.

It wasn’t fluid like Shadow Runner, but it allowed Suiz to advance at a higher speed when traveling in straight lines. By moving faster than the human eye could follow and rapidly changing direction, it was like he was disappearing and reappearing out of nowhere—like a light blinking on and off, fitting for its name.

“Take this! Knock!”

Furthermore, Suiz was using the hilt of his dagger to take out the guards as he went. With the speed of Light Blink behind the blunt force blow, it probably had enough power to shatter their jaws in addition to knocking them out. The fact it *didn’t* meant he had perfect control over it. His execution in simply knocking them out was like a captivating art.

“Could I do that too?” I wondered.

I took out my dagger and gazed at the hilt, but I knew just how crappy my weapon handling was for a thief. I couldn’t let myself get carried away here and mess this up.

“Palm Shot!”

I rushed at a nearby guard with Shadow Runner and used a familiar art instead. I imitated Suiz and aimed for the jaw, but would it be enough to knock someone out?

“Ugh...” The guard thrust his spear into the ground for support as he stumbled.

Damn. I held back too much. Fortunately, though, my first Palm Shot left him completely open for a second round.

“Here’s another!” This time, the soldier fell down unconscious. “I guess I still have to put some force into it for it to work...”

In the time I'd spent struggling against one guy, Suiz had taken down three.

What tremendous speed... Am I really doing any good here?

That was a worrying thought, but I didn't have time to stew over it at the moment. We'd already caused enough of a commotion to attract more guards. I could even sense the big guns that Cardinal Fuge had hired heading our way. Suiz was already a fair distance ahead of me—and if we got separated completely, I'd end up surrounded.

"I guess he won't wait for me..." I muttered, firing another Palm Shot at a nearby soldier.

This time I could feel something crack under the weight of my hand. Maybe I'd overdone it... Well, it wasn't a fatal injury and there were plenty of priests around. He'd be healed up in no time, so surely it was fine.

"Palm Shot!"

By the third guard, I'd figured out how much strength to use.

So this is how much power you need to knock someone out. I learned something today.

After taking down one, then two more guards with Palm Shots, I checked to make sure they were out cold.

"Hey, we're here," called Suiz.

Before I knew it, we were at the door leading to the rear hall where Neme was being held. Just how many guards had Suiz laid out while I was practicing with my Palm Shot? I hurried over to him while he handily used Unlock to open the door.

"That was so anticlimactic that it was practically a snooze," he commented.

"Personally, I'd be happy if things stay this way," I replied. Suiz opened the door to reveal more guards, who noticed us and came charging. "Oh, I jinxed it."

"Nah, we should be able to handle this much."

Suiz immediately activated Light Blink. His mental reaction time was as

impressive as his physical speed. I followed him by activating Shadow Runner, knocking out the soldiers he missed while trailing his steps.

“Turn right at the next intersection,” I called to him.

“Got it.”

Suiz was a thief himself, so he knew how to use detection arts. Instead of calling out enemy positions like I did in the dungeon, I only had to give him directions. Were things really this easy with a top-tier thief on our side? I was nothing but grateful to have Suiz with me.

“The soldiers here aren’t putting up much of a fight,” he remarked.

“You’re just too strong for them, Suiz.”

“You think so?”

“It’d be different in a head-on battle, but thieves excel in ambush tactics like this.”

That was likely why the guards had yet to get the better of me. I’d lose a duel nine out of every ten times, but even I had a fighting chance on my own terms.

“Duck into the second-to-last room on this hallway.”

“Here?”

Suiz and I arrived at a storage room filled with scriptures, books, and documents scattered around the place.

“It should be around here...” I dragged a shelf to the side to reveal a corridor behind it. As I’d expected, this was the hidden passageway we were looking for. “If we take this, we should reach the rear hall, no problem.”

“That so?”

Suiz and I entered the corridor and returned the shelf to its original position before making our way down a dark set of stairs. At the bottom was a long passage leading to an open space under the church’s rear hall. It was filled with support pillars for the building and nothing more apart from a doorway on the other side that led back up into the church.

“This really is anticlimactic.” Suiz hung his light on a nearby pillar. He

continued to the next and hung another glowing artifact, and then another. The room was soon illuminated enough that I could see his face. “It wouldn’t be bad to help you get your friend back like this and part ways, but it just isn’t interesting that way.”

“I don’t really need it to be interesting,” I replied with a laugh.

Suiz’s face twitched. “You might not, but I do.” With that, he turned to face me. “I told you from the start, Note Athlon, I only do things I find interesting.”

“What are you getting at?” I asked, realizing that something about him seemed different.

He shrugged and answered, “I accepted your job because I thought something interesting would happen. But you didn’t live up to it.”

“Well, sorry about that.”

“However, Fuge’s a guy who always exceeds my expectations. He brings me jobs beyond my wildest dreams.”

Why was he bringing up Cardinal Fuge now? I had a bad feeling as Suiz kept talking.

“Note, do you know what the best way to gather information is? A thief of your caliber must, right?”

“What...?”

“Don’t play the fool. The easiest way is to get it straight from the horse’s mouth.”

As I struggled to get my head around what was unfolding, Suiz said something that took me by complete surprise.

“I wanted information about the saint, so I went straight to Fuge. He and I go a long way back, see. It wasn’t all that odd for me to go poking around.”

I had never considered that he’d make direct contact with Cardinal Fuge. No wonder he knew so much detail about the saint candidates and Arcia’s skill...

“My only miscalculation was that he already knew I’d met up with you guys thanks to Greater Far Sight. Fuge knew I was working against him, and he laid it

all out. Then,” Suiz continued, “he said to me, ‘Come to my side. I’ll make sure you get something interesting out of it.’ He’s just the best, isn’t he? He knows what I want, and he knows how to deliver.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to betray us.”

“Betrayal, huh? Well, yeah, I suppose that’s what this is,” Suiz said with a smile. “But it’s your fault for trusting me so blindly, you know? At the end of the day, I’m still a thief. Hiding my hostility is a piece of cake.”

I still couldn’t feel any from him with Enemy Search—but of course not. Suiz Myran was the strongest thief around. I was a fool for thinking I could trust him just because I hadn’t sensed any ill intent.

I suppressed my rising anger and replied, “All right, I understand you’re turning on us, but there’s one thing I don’t get. What’s so interesting about ditching us for Cardinal Fuge? In my eyes, buttering up to someone of power is the act of a coward.”

“Don’t be so harsh, Note Athlon. He simply offered me the best reward.”

“What reward? Money? Power?”

“No. *This*.” Suiz spread his arms wide. “A one-on-one battle against the strongest thief, Note Athlon.”

Top Dog vs. Underdog

“You think *I’m* the strongest thief? What are you on about?” I had to ask. I couldn’t understand what Suiz was saying. He must have mistaken me for someone else.

“C’mon now,” he said. “What are you acting all cool for this late in the game?”

“I’m not acting cool. I really don’t amount to much as a thief. I’m certainly not a worthy opponent for you—”

“You’re not much of a thief? If that’s true, then the other thieves of the world are nothing at all.” Suiz looked up at the dark ceiling as he spoke. “Note Athlon of the Arrivers... Thieves are inherently lacking in firepower, and that should become painfully obvious the further you get in the dungeon. Yet in spite of that, you’re the only one at the forefront of dungeon exploration. Isn’t that right?”

“That’s—” Sure, I’d reached the end floors of the Dungeon of Puriff as a member of Arrivers, but that wasn’t because *I* was strong. I left all the monsters to the other members, and my only effective attack was leftover magic that Erin let me borrow and store as Spell Shots. “I haven’t gotten where I am on my own strength.”

“What? You’ve gotta be kidding me. You were stranded on floor 20 with a lone mage and managed to drag both of you back alive. That’s a whole legend now, you know?”

It was? The ordeal Erin and I had gone through on floor 20 wasn’t anything as impressive as it sounded. In truth, we’d gotten caught in a teleportation trap and were warped to an unknown floor, where we’d only managed to survive by luck. One wrong move could’ve gotten us killed, and if it weren’t for Erin, we wouldn’t have been able to defeat a single monster.

“Sounds like you’ve done your research on me,” I said. “But I think you’re overestimating me.”

“Aren’t you the one underestimating yourself? Just so you know, I didn’t have to do any research—your reputation precedes you. You may not be a household name to the general population, but you’re a celebrity among thieves.”

“I’m a celebrity...?”

“That’s right. It’s rare enough for thieves to be involved in the dungeon scene, but you rose to fame overnight after the Seventh Sage Selection. It’s a renowned event that people gather from countries away to come see. Security there has to be absurdly strict. Yet you stole the MVP, the next Seventh Sage, in front of everyone. There’s no way people *wouldn’t* notice a thief of that caliber.”

Back when I’d whisked Erin away from the Seventh Sage Selection, I was so focused on the matter at hand that I hadn’t really given a thought to anything else. Looking back on it now, it was a reckless move that I probably wouldn’t be able to repeat.

“But you’re more famous than I am, Suiz. I heard you’re one of the top five thieves—”

“I doubt that. Sure, I’ve heard the same rumors, but my record doesn’t hold a candle to yours. My infiltration of Filon and subjugation of the evil spirit Grushar are nothing compared to your feats in the dungeon. You’re definitely a bigger deal.”

I’m a bigger deal than Suiz? Is this a joke? My confusion must have been written all over my face.

“Maybe you’re not aware of it, but that’s how folks regard you—the monster thief who’s hit the top without any combat skills. Who could pass up the opportunity to fight a guy like you?”

Had stories about me taken a life of their own? I was sure the other Arrivers would all say the same thing—that I definitely wasn’t a strong adventurer.

“Sorry to let you down, but you’re in for a disappointment if you insist on fighting me,” I said.

“Really? You haven’t disappointed me so far. You kept up with my speed in the square earlier, didn’t you? You could even follow my moves with your eyes,

yeah?”

Suiz had the wrong idea about me, and apparently no interest in correcting it. But I didn’t have time to play along with this little game of his. I needed to save Neme as soon as possible.

“Fine, I understand you want to fight. I’ll take you on, but not here and not now. Once I save Neme—”

“C’mon now, don’t be so cold. You expect me to be satisfied with a mock battle with nothing on the line? That isn’t interesting at all. But a do-or-die situation with the fate of a friend on the line... Don’t you think this is when you’d fight the hardest?”

“You’re crazy...”

I risked my life in the dungeon on the regular, so I didn’t have a whole lot of room to criticize his policies, but I just couldn’t get my head around Suiz. Seeking out the interesting was one thing—there’s nothing wrong with living your life by your own rules—but it’s messed up to drag other people into that.

“Crazy, huh? I’ll take that as a compliment.” Suiz replied with a shameless laugh.

Suiz Myran was definitely a top-tier thief. It was thanks to him that we’d learned about the eyes on us and formulated a plan to break into the enemy’s base. But him turning on us at the last moment ruined everything. I regretted asking for his help.

“We should have just rescued Neme ourselves...”

“Aww, don’t be like that. I might be siding with Fuge, but I didn’t tell him anything about your attack. He knows how to handle me, so he lets me do as I please.”

“So what?”

“It’s simple. If you defeat me, your plan will proceed without a hitch. On the other hand, if you lose, you can say goodbye to your comrade. She’s worth giving your all for, wouldn’t you say?”

“You’re sick, man...”

By dangling the slim possibility of a successful rescue in front of me, he knew I'd fight. What a cunning—and effective—ploy. There was no turning back for me now. If I let Suiz go here, he'd reveal our entire plan to Fuge, and we'd never get another chance like this to retrieve Neme. If we wanted to take her back, it had to be now. I had to defeat Suiz.

"I'm not good at this kind of thing..."

A one-on-one match with a party member's fate on the line... The last time I'd done this was dueling the Headhunter for Jin's life. If it hadn't been for Riece's help, I would've lost back then. The only other experience I had that came close was challenging Force to get him to join the Arrivers again. He'd accepted after I surprised him by landing a Spell Shot, but I'd ultimately lost the match.

I wasn't especially strong. I knew that better than anyone. If I had to fight, I liked to prepare thoroughly beforehand. I could only contend with stronger opponents by devising clever countermeasures. Without that, I didn't stand a chance against fighters like the Headhunter and Force. And yet here I was, staring down a battle out of the blue—the worst possible scenario for me.

"Finally feeling motivated?" asked Suiz. "Opportunities to face stronger opponents really decrease as your fame increases. I'm so excited, this reminds me of my younger days."

Unfortunately, my opponent this time wasn't overly cocky. He considered this a challenge. I didn't get it—why was someone so much stronger than me acting like I was the threat? By any reasonable measure, I was the underdog here.

"This sucks..."

I sighed while bracing my hands in front of me. I didn't grab my dagger—this was a stance for a fistfight. I didn't have any choice but to throw down. No matter how low my odds were, I had to win for Neme's sake.

"I won't go easy on you."

I wasn't about to let Suiz get the drop on me. I immediately used Shadow Runner and started running.

"C'mon, you won't even wait for the starting signal?"

Suiz in turn activated his Light Blink. The distance I'd closed between us redoubled in an instant. I had no idea what tricks he was hiding up his sleeve. But just like how my fighting style relied on Shadow Runner, Suiz probably fought around Light Blink. Light Blink could outdo Shadow Runner in straight line speed, but Shadow Runner was superior with nonlinear movement. Light Blink had to decelerate when making turns, whereas Shadow Runner had no such time loss. In other words, I had to keep moving in arcs. I darted in every direction, shifting this way and that to toy with my opponent.

"Oh, so you won't charge straight at me? Well, I guess you wouldn't want to go close quarters against an armed opponent," Suiz said, drawing a dagger. He chucked it, then another.

"You can throw those too?" I asked.

"Of course. Any dagger user can do the same—but you evaded them so easily."

"My master specialized in throwing weapons. I'm kinda used to it."

"Then how about this?"

With that, Suiz retrieved a red dagger from his breast pocket. The ones he'd just thrown just were made of a bluish metal. This one was clearly different. Did it have some kind of magical property?

"You seem to be on guard. Get ready. It wouldn't be any fun if you died now."

No sooner had he said that than purple lightning roared past my ears.

What? What just happened?

I couldn't follow it with my eyes, but if that had struck me, I would've been toast in one shot. It was sheer coincidence that I'd been able to avoid it.

"You evaded at the last second on reflex, huh? By channeling mana through this weapon, I can shoot magical lightning between it and an anchor point. The anchors are those daggers I threw just now."

I glanced at one of the blue daggers stabbed into the pillar behind me. Indeed, the lightning had shot straight to it from the dagger in Suiz's hands.

"Of course, I have multiple anchors. Watch yourself," he warned.

“Gee, it was nice of you to explain how your artifact works,” I scoffed.

“Oh, that’s because revealing its ability makes my opponent’s strategy more interesting. Let’s play.”

Suiz dashed along the ground in a zigzag line with Light Blink. I could hear him throwing more anchor daggers, but it was difficult to pinpoint them in the dimly lit underground room. I had to avoid standing between them and Suiz, but I couldn’t tell where they were and Suiz was constantly moving. He was right—just knowing about his weapon’s ability wasn’t going to save me from it. I had to think.

“For now, I’d better keep moving...”

Suiz could only nail me with his lightning magic if he caught me between him and an anchor point...meaning I was safe as long as he couldn’t tell where I was. I used Shadow Runner to stay in motion while tracking down all the daggers he’d thrown so far.

“There’re four—no—five of them?”

There was one by the entrance, and one to the right of that. Then one to either side of us, plus one at the back.

“Whoa, you’ve already found them? Jeez, this isn’t much of a fight.” Suiz approached the anchor in the wall to our side while shooting more purple lightning. He then retrieved the dagger and threw it to reposition it. “Now I have to memorize their locations again.”

Since the anchors were daggers, moving them was easy enough. The catch would be keeping track of all of them. Still, the fact that Suiz hadn’t thrown a sixth one meant he only had five in total... No, it was too early to jump to conclusions. I was up against a top-tier thief. He could be faking me out by hiding one on his person.

I had a general idea of where he threw the dagger he’d just retrieved. I needed to defeat him before he moved the others. I tried to use Shadow Runner to close the distance between us, but Suiz retreated across the room. When I gave chase, he did an about-face.

“I can use it like this too, you know?”

Lightning flashed toward me once again—this time from the anchor near the entrance. I evaded it at first, but it continued to streak forward on Suiz's trail, obliterating a pillar between us.

"That's cheating." I swiftly activated Sinking Walk to slip under the bolt coming at me at the speed of light. "I would've died if that hit me."

"You evaded it, though."

"I was lucky to react in time."

"But this move's no good," Suiz laughed, looking at the crumbling pillar. "I'll destroy this place if I use it too much."

"You'll bury us both alive if you do."

"Right? I'll have to save it for a critical moment."

"I'd rather you never use it again."

"Unfortunately, I have to pull out all the stops against my current opponent."

With that, Suiz kicked off the wall and closed in on me with Light Blink. Close combat was easier for me than a midrange face-off with moving lightning, but I wasn't exactly itching to get into a head-to-head clash. Shadow Runner and Light Blink were both contenders for the title of fastest art. It was difficult enough for me to keep my bearings when I used mine. Against an opponent moving at similar speeds, there was the possibility our arts could result in a fierce collision. I had to think of this as a game of chicken.

I was going to approach Suiz before using Shadow Runner again, then change directions with my specialty curves to pass beside or behind him. Suiz would be expecting this and change his trajectory midway, so I positioned myself to take advantage of it when he did. As I thought—the moment I moved to the side with Shadow Runner, he burst the other way with Light Blink. We'd luckily moved in opposite directions on our first pass. We could no longer visibly perceive each other. This was a battle of prediction based on instincts.

The second pass, however, wasn't so lucky. We moved toward each other instead of away, bringing me within range of Suiz's blade.

"Knock."

As his dagger swung upward toward my chin, I thought about drawing my own to intercept it—then paused. His dagger was a magic artifact. If it could shoot lightning, it could probably wreath itself in lightning too. And as soon as that thought crossed my mind, I forcefully twisted my body to avoid the path of the blade. It was a reckless move that stopped me cold mid-Shadow Runner—and Suiz wasn't about to overlook that opening.

“Blink.”

Instead of activating an art to retreat, I did the opposite and pressed forward. It was a messy collision that could barely be called a tackle, but Suiz hadn't seen it coming. He was unable to defend himself with his dagger in time, and we slammed into the ground together. Neither of us were moving now. This would be my best chance. I immediately sat up, only to find Suiz had done the same. We'd apparently had similar ideas.

“Ghost Touch.”

“Palm Shot!”

Suiz's dagger split into two swinging arcs, but I blew both of them away. We were within point-blank range of one another, so the length of our weapons no longer mattered. I could fight barehanded like this. I knocked Suiz's blade swings with Palm Shot and Stream in turn. He didn't hit me once, but I wasn't able to land a blow on him either.

“Take this!”

Suiz seemed to find our current melee unfavorable, so he switched back to shooting lightning from his dagger. I lost my balance dodging the bolt, allowing him to land a swift kick in my gut. Even with the wind knocked out of me, though, I managed to take some distance. Suiz and I both collected ourselves.

He spun the dagger in his hand as he said, “C'mon, Note Athlon. Give me a break.”

“I'm the one who'd like the break. Please lose already.”

“You're asking me to lose? When you have no intention of genuinely defeating me?” he asked. I could sense some anger behind his words. “When will you start getting serious, huh?”

“I’m always fighting seriously. If it doesn’t feel that way to you, then sorry—but I warned you that you were in for a disappointment.”

“That’s not it. You still haven’t given this your all.” Suiz pointed his dagger my way with a glare. “Sure, you’re evading my attacks seriously. But you aren’t *fighting* seriously.”

“That’s because I lack offensive power.”

“That’s not true. You’re an adventurer who fights dungeon monsters. There’s no way you don’t have a means of attack. You’re just saving it, right?”

He had a point. If I used Spell Shot, I might be able to turn the tables. But it was my ace in the hole for retrieving Neme. I couldn’t waste it on an intermediary fight like this.

As though he’d read my mind, Suiz then said, “On top of that, you’re underestimating me. Even when I’m using everything in my power, artifacts and all.”

“I’m not underestimating you—”

“Then why won’t you use it? Because you want to save your friend? If so, use it here to defeat me, then move forward.”

“Even if I defeat you, it’d be meaningless if I can’t save Neme afterward.”

“Ooh, so you’re thinking ahead to after you defeat me. I shouldn’t expect anything less from the strongest thief around. Must be my lucky day,” Suiz laughed loudly. He then yelled, his eyes wide and his voice booming, “Don’t be so arrogant! I’m not such a pushover that you can defeat me while holding back!”

Arrogant? I hadn’t realized it myself, but maybe I was a little overconfident deep down. Suiz was facing me with all his might, yet I was only thinking of Neme. I was up against the strongest thief I knew, but there was a part of me that believed things would work out one way or another. Like he’d said, Suiz wasn’t the kind of guy I could hold back with. He was a formidable opponent. One who’d take me down if I gave him half a chance. I was the challenger here—I couldn’t forget that. Even if Suiz felt like he was the underdog, it didn’t change the reality of the situation.

“You’re right. I’ve gotta pull myself together...”

That was my mistake. I needed to use everything Erin had entrusted to me in order to defeat Suiz. That was my immediate goal, and there was no point in thinking beyond it.

“Thanks. I’ve seen the light now.”

I took one step, then another as I spoke. I didn’t use Shadow Runner—I was simply walking at a slow, leisurely pace. The magic at my disposal would end this match in an instant. If it all worked as I hoped, victory was about to be mine. And if not, I’d be out of cards to play and Suiz would get the better of me. The deciding factor was extremely simple. Everything was riding on this one blow. What mattered the most was distance—I had to gauge it accurately on sight alone. Fortunately, with Mapping, that was my forte.

I feigned as much composure as I could as I sauntered toward Suiz. He would activate his Light Blink the moment I used Shadow Runner, but he seemed unsure how to respond to my relaxed gait. Perhaps he was confident he could get away from me if he needed to. Little did he know my next Spell Shot exceeded the speed of Shadow Runner. And I was now exactly five meters from him.

As soon as I reached that threshold, I activated Trap Dismantling. I was instantly behind Suiz. I hadn’t triggered the offensive spell circle in my palm, but a different one on the back of my hand. It was a type of magic that had previously been the bane of my existence—teleportation. I’d activated it to warp behind Suiz. *Then* I activated the other spell in my palm.

“Bind!”

As its name indicated, this was a binding spell. Bands of light reached out like rapidly growing branches. Even Suiz was taken aback by the ambush, and in his astonishment, the bands coiled tightly around him to restrain him.



“...Huh?”

The binding completely ensnared Suiz, holding him frozen in place. This was the spell Erin had given me before the operation—one effective against humans, but one that wouldn’t kill.

“What is this? Binding magic? Some kind of artifact?”

With all his limbs and joints locked up, Suiz was powerless to free himself. All he could do was wait for the spell to expire.

“It’s Erin’s magic,” I explained. “You can’t move anymore. Shall we consider this my win?”

“How do you have her magic? No, that’s not important. How did you suddenly get behind me?”

Suiz hadn’t yet realized the secret to my trick. Following Shadow Runner with your eyes required getting the hang of its movement, and once Suiz had adjusted to it, he was left oblivious when I instantly disappeared on him.

“We got the idea from a teleportation trap we found in the dungeon. Erin used her knowledge of spatial magic to improve it into a spell that allows the caster to warp to a specific point.”

And that specific point was five meters forward. That was why I’d needed to get exactly that distance from Suiz. After that, all I’d had to do was trigger the trap, turn around, and activate the binding magic in my palm.

“I see. An instant warp, huh? That’s over my head, but I guess I should’ve expected as much from a thief like you.”

“It’s really all thanks to Erin.”

She was the one who’d suggested incorporating something other than Spell Shot into my gloves. They were made of a fabric catalyst, and I always stored Spell Shot in the palms by necessity, but that left the back side free. She’d thus had the idea to add magic circles there that couldn’t be activated by Palm Shot anyway—my right hand held Gate, while my left held the teleportation trap. Meanwhile, my right palm contained an offensive spell and my left binding magic.

“This was my first time using it, so I’m glad it worked out... Unfortunately, this is still going to make things harder for me from here.”

I wasn’t supposed to waste the teleportation trap in a fight. The original plan was to get close to Neme’s room and use it to get inside, but now I’d spent it against Suiz. There was no crying over spilled milk, though. He was the strongest thief around, and he hadn’t left me much choice in the matter.

“Honestly, how am I supposed to get to Neme now? There are too many guards here. It’s impossible now, isn’t it?”

“Who knows? Don’t ask me. I’m just the loser here. I won’t get in your way anymore.”

“You sure accepted your defeat readily.”

“I know when to give up. I’ve lost. I was completely and utterly defeated.”

“You look pretty happy in spite of that.”

“Duh! I don’t get to have interesting fights like that every day. I’m completely satisfied.”

“You betrayed us so you could fight me, and now you’re satisfied that you lost? I can’t believe you...”

“Don’t be like that. You had fun too, didn’t you?”

I sighed at the childish innocence in Suiz’s eyes. “I guess a little. I never want to do that again, though.”

“It wouldn’t kill you to be a little more honest about your desires, you know?”

“You’re *too* honest about yours, Suiz.”

Crusher Strikes

I, Roslia Minkgott, was in the middle of infiltrating Salengre Cathedral with my fellow Arriver Sofie. The cathedral was a tourist destination, so actually entering the premises was simple. The main church and rear sanctuary were closed to the public, but we were able to get into the main church thanks to Note and Suiz taking out a good deal of the guards. Our role as decoys was to make a scene, but since our plan was rather haphazard, we didn't have any specific instructions on how to go about doing that. Thus Sofie and I were currently strolling around the worship hall. When we turned the corner, we came across a swordsman.

"Trespassers, huh?" He grasped his katana in a fighting stance as he introduced himself. "I'm Juran, master of the legendary blade Calm Night. Here's to a fair fight—"

"Wait, we're not trespassers. We're just maids. See? Look at her uniform," I said, gesturing at Sofie.

The swordsman stared at Sofie's outfit while muttering, "Oh, you're totally right. My bad, my bad." He then moved aside to let Sofie pass, but stopped himself mid-step and turned back to me. "I can see that she's a maid, but how come you're in armor—"

"Sofie, do it," I ordered.

"As you wish."

Sofie planted her fist in the man's stomach. As he bent forward, I dropped an elbow on him that left him swooning.

"Nice tag-team move, Sofie!"

"That wasn't so much a coordinated effort as it was you jumping in..."

"Come to think of it, did this guy just say he had a legendary blade?"

"Are you listening to me?"

Ignoring Sofie's protests, I picked up the man's sword. "Is this a good weapon, Sofie?"

"It's worthy of being called a legendary blade, I suppose so..."

"Then let's take it with us. Force needs a new sword, after all."

"Yeah, that would make this a mugging," Sofie criticized me with a harsh look in her eyes.

Tch, and I'd thought it was a great idea...

"Listen, Sofie," I said, "at this rate, we won't be causing much of a commotion."

"That's true, but..."

"I know! How about we try to break into the treasury? I'm sure they have lots of good stuff here!"

"We'll become thieves if we take anything, so no."

"We won't take anything! I've always liked looking at national treasures in the vaults. When I was little, I'd often ask my father to show them to me. Let's go and see what magic artifacts Aifan holds!"

"The vaults aren't open to tourists... Moreover, what were you doing as a girl that you had access to someone's national treasury?"

"Whoops. Pretend you didn't hear that." I stuck out my tongue jokingly and brushed off the matter.

"I don't really follow... But whatever you say," Sofie acquiesced.

I couldn't say the same for anyone else, but Sofie never forced the issue by asking too many questions. Was it because she was considerate, or because she didn't really care? Either way, I was grateful.

"Anyways," I said, returning to the topic at hand, "I don't think hitting the treasury is a bad idea. If we get into where the nation keeps their valuables, they'll have no choice but to send security after us."

"That's true..."

"We're supposed to be decoys! It's our job to cause as much trouble as

possible!”

“I guess...”

“Plus, I’ll get my treasury tour. It’s two birds with one stone!”

“You just want to see the valuables.”

“Jokes aside, how about it? Let’s go to the treasury and cause a big scene, all right?”

“If we must...”

Although she nodded, Sofie didn’t look entirely persuaded. It wasn’t every day that I had the chance to scope out Aifan’s national treasury. Who knew if I’d ever get an opportunity like this again? I had to convince Sofie no matter what.

“Has Princess Leyfa ever told you you’re stubborn, Sofie?”

“Her Highness has mentioned that I stick to orders too closely...”

“Exactly! Right now, the Arrivers have sent us on a mission to distract the soldiers here—but they never said *how* we should do that. If we don’t put on one heck of a show, we’ll just be doing the boring old bare minimum.”

“I don’t like that idea...”

“Who would? If we disappoint Note and the others, Princess Leyfa will be disgusted too!”

“All right. Let’s do it. I’m not some girl who just follows orders.”

Sofie was surprisingly simple sometimes. After being on the receiving end of her lectures on a daily basis, I’d come to understand how to deal with her—just bring up Princess Leyfa’s name, and most anything could be resolved peacefully.

“Now, time for the Aifan treasury tour!”

“I feel like I’ve been duped...”

I decided to ignore the mumbling I could hear behind me. Onward!

As soon as we entered the treasury, a blaring alarm went off throughout the church.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“A magical sensor,” Sofie replied. “The type that sounds when someone enters its range.”

“It’s pretty loud... Feels like my eardrums are going to burst. What a pain.”

“That’s not all. Now that they all know someone’s entered the treasury, the soldiers in the church will come flooding here. Thinking it through rationally, we’ll never be able to escape against that many of them. I was the fool for going along with your little plan...”

“No point crying over spilled milk. Go block the door with your earth magic, if you’d be so kind.”

“At least show some remorse...”

Despite her reproachful stare, Sofie complied and used her earth spirit arts to barricade the entrance. She really was dedicated, following orders even while complaining.

“Now no one should be able to get in for a while,” I said approvingly.

“But we can’t get out either,” she replied.

“Guess it’s time to take a thorough tour of the treasury!”

“How can you be so easygoing about this? Talk about rose-colored glasses...”

I ignored Sofie’s criticism and picked up a blue shield sitting nearby. “Look at this! Isn’t it beautiful? What kind of enchantment does it have, Miss Tour Guide?”

“I’m not a tour guide. High Appraisal tells me it’s just a normal ornamental shield. And not a very durable one at that.”

“That sucks. I’ll just toss it over here.”

“Be more careful than that. What if you broke it?”

“Hey, look at this! It’s a full set of armor! Is this enchanted?”

“Are you listening?”

My excitement increased with every new treasure we laid eyes on, but Sofie remained coldly calm. I thought it was a waste not to enjoy this rare look inside the treasury, personally. While I was checking out the trove, there came loud

yelling from the other side of the door.

“Halt, thieves! Get out here now!”

How rude. That was a completely false accusation. We were just looking around, not stealing anything.

“This could be bad,” Sofie said, grabbing my arm while I was gawking. “The soldiers are trying to force the door open. We’ll be safe for a while longer, but it’s only a matter of time before they break through and catch us. We have to escape.”

“I wanted to look around a bit more, but I guess we have to cut things short. Oh, look, there’s a convenient door that leads deeper into this place.”

“You’re right. But it looks really heavy—”

“How ’bout this?!”

I summoned Fractus and took a horizontal swing. Even if I couldn’t use my weapon’s full potential, it was still a holy sword. A mundane door was no obstacle.

“What is this place?” I muttered.

Since the next room was deep inside the treasury, I was hoping to find even greater wonders, but it didn’t look like a storage room. Pipes sprawled across its walls and a huge sphere sat in the center of it all. What *was* this?

“It’s the power core of the fortress...” Sofie mumbled quietly.

“What’d you say?”

“Do you remember the story our driver told us on the way in? About how Visril was a fortress created by a dwarf named Forge?”

“Now that you mention it, that sort of rings a bell. What about it, though?”

“The city has lost its function as a fortress over time, but this device was once the heart of it all.”

“Ah, so it’s important. That’s why it’s hidden in the depths of the treasury.”

I approached the sphere and lightly put my hand to it. It was smooth, metallic, and cool to the touch. From what I could see, it and the surrounding structure

were both made of materials I'd never seen before. No wonder this couldn't be replicated with modern technology. I was kinda taken aback to know that it had all been created with a holy skill just like mine.



“Will it blow up if I touch it?”

“Why ask *after* touching it? You don’t need to worry, though. It’s completely empty of magic power right now. There’s no risk of it activating or exploding.”

“That’s good. But, so, why don’t the people of Visril use this? If it’s out of juice, can’t they just refill it?”

“I can’t imagine how much energy is needed to power a whole city, but perhaps it requires a special way of adding more mana. Maybe it had to be Forge’s magic or something.”

“Wow, what a picky device...”

“It’s not terribly complex, really. It’s basically another type of magic artifact—just an incredibly large one that encompasses the entire city.”

“So it’s like a magic artifact, is it?”

Sofie’s words reminded me of something. In my training to master Guide of the Holy Sword, I’d practice channeling the holy sword’s power into magic items. They were all so fragile that they broke immediately, but...surely this amazing core thingy could handle it, right?

That gave me a brilliant idea. If I tried pouring energy into the power core, I might learn the secret to controlling my sword. See, every obstacle is just opportunity in disguise! It was fate that I’d stumbled across this artifact here and now. If I awakened to Guide of the Holy Sword’s full potential like this, I’d be able to take care of the soldiers coming after us.

“Hah!”

I started channeling Fractus’s power through my palms. It never flowed very smoothly with regular magic items, but now it strangely felt like it was permeating through the sphere—almost like the device was sucking my magic out of me.

“Huh, okay. I think I’ve almost got the hang of it.” I tried channeling my full power into the core, then suddenly, the room trembled. “What is that? Feels like the whole place is shaking.”

“It’s an earthquake,” said Sofie. “Let’s stay here until it passes.”

“Right. There’s nothing to fall on us in this room, so it should be safe.”

“But the shaking’s not stopping. In fact, isn’t it getting stronger?”

“Now that you mention it, yeah, it does feel that way.”

“Perhaps this is no normal earthquake.”

“Do you think Note and the others are okay? I’m worried.”

“I don’t know, but they’ll probably be fine— Roslia, what are you doing?”

Sofie looked my way in shock. It kind of startled me. Was something wrong?

“What’s up?” I asked.

“You’re still touching the core...”

“Oh, this? I was just pouring my holy sword’s magic energy into it as a test—” I stopped mid-sentence when I realized...the core was glowing! It was humming with a dull sound as it activated! What was going on? “I’m not doing anything other than channeling magic into it, though!”

“Are you stupid? Why would you put magic into it?!”

“I figured it’d be fine! I had no idea this would happen!”

“It shouldn’t normally! Get your hands away from it and stop feeding it magic already!”

“Right!”

I withdrew both hands and retreated to Sofie, but the core continued whirring away. It was glowing like it would blow at any moment.

“What should we do?! It’s not gonna explode, is it?!” I asked Sofie frantically.

“I don’t know...” she muttered.

“Tell me it won’t! You have High Appraisal, don’t you?”

“My skill can’t tell me everything. You’re the one who made the core glow. *You* fix it.”

“Sorry, no can do! I may have put magic into it, but I don’t know how to take it back out!”

“Why did you do something you can’t undo?!”

We fell back to a corner of the room, but it was probably too late. The core was steaming and churning at full speed. I unwittingly clung to Sofie in fear.

“What is it doing?!” I yelled. “What’s about to happen?!”

“The fortress is about to move because of the holy sword... I think.”

“What happens when the fortress moves?!”

“If I knew, we wouldn’t be in this predicament right now.”

“You’re so useless!”

“I don’t want to hear that from the person who initiated this!”

Someday in the Distant Future

“Wah! What’s that?!”

Shaken by a huge earthquake, Neme Pargin shot to her feet in her room. Visril lay in a mountainous region known for seismic activity, but she’d never felt anything of this magnitude before. She went to her door to see what was going on. There were priests posted just outside to prevent her from escaping, but they were all similarly bewildered.

“Now’s my chance— Ack!”

Neme tried to use the opportunity to run, but she tripped amid all the shaking. Of course, the priests caught her and immediately returned her to her room.

“So much for that...”

Her shoulders slumped in disappointment, but she could hear something going on outside. Guards were running around in a fuss. She tried eavesdropping by pressing her ear to the door, and eventually, Arcia appeared. Neme laid into her immediately.

“What’s going on?!” she demanded.

“I don’t know. Your friends came for you, but two fled the city, two vanished, and two activated the fortress core. Everything’s a mess now.”

Arcia seemed to be flustered herself, as she was now talking to Neme like old times. Her tone aside, however, Neme found something rather strange about what Arcia had just reported.

“How come there’s an extra person?!”

“*That’s* what you’re concerned about?! I just told you that your friends activated the fortress!”

“Oh, the fortress... What?!” Neme lived in her own world, but as a Visril native, even she understood the gravity of the centuries-old artifact awakening.

Her voice grew shrill as she asked, “Wh-What happens now?!”

“I don’t know the answer to that. This has never happened before, so the whole church is in a panic. For now, I have to mobilize the soldiers and get to the bottom of things. That’s why I came here, but...what am I supposed to do? Cardinal Fuge is out of town right now because he went after your friends that fled...”

“Sounds rough.”

“It’s all your fault... How can you sound so detached about it?”

“Neme didn’t do anything! It’s not my fault at all!”

“I doubt that...” Arcia pressed a hand against her forehead, holding back the headache Neme’s argument inspired. “Nothing good happens when you’re involved.”

“That’s so mean!”

“But it’s the truth. Even at the presentation ceremony...”

Neme hadn’t expected Arcia to be the one to bring that up. She gulped, her breath caught in her throat.

“You always acted so unmotivated,” Arcia continued, “yet you had the nerve to go and take Saint’s Authority. Worse, the moment you did, you ran away and eschewed the sainthood for a life of adventuring. Just how much must you insult the rest of us before you’re satisfied?”

“That wasn’t Neme’s intention...”

Finally, Neme realized that was how Arcia saw things. A piercing pain seized her heart. Neme had never desired Saint’s Authority. God had given it to her as some kind of joke. But Arcia didn’t understand that.

“Neme doesn’t want to be the saint...”

“Then why do you have Saint’s Authority?!”

“That’s what Neme wants to know! It has to be a mistake! You were supposed to get it!”

Arcia slammed her palms against the desk loudly, yelling, “What?! If this is

some pitying act, then stop it already! It only makes me feel worse!”

Arcia really had changed. She never would’ve gotten angry enough to yell before. She was always gentle when she spoke to Neme. She’d changed—and it was Neme’s fault. It was all because she’d gotten the wrong skill. As Neme wallowed in guilt over it...

“Oh? Are you two in the middle of something?” asked someone from the doorway.

Neme looked up to see a girl in a priestess’s garb poking her head inside.

“Long time no see, Neme!” the girl greeted her, stepping into the room with a smile.

Neme froze in place, an odd expression on her face.

“It’s me! You know, *me*! Do you remember?” the girl asked.

“What...? Are you some kind of scammer?” Neme remarked in disbelief.

“No! I’m Fran! Don’t tell me you forgot me!”

“Flan?”

“Why are you acting so clueless?! Did you really forget? You always sat next to me at dinner and stole my dessert! We even shared a room! After you left, the nuns found all your books under my bed. It was a huge ordeal for me!”

“Oh, I remember now! You were my roomie, Francois!”

“No ‘cois’! It’s just Fran! You totally forgot, didn’t you?!”

“Neme isn’t the kind of woman to cling to the past...”

“You really should remember Fran, Neme,” scolded Arcia. Even she was offended on Fran’s behalf. That aside, Fran’s appearance had helped her collect herself. “So what are you here for, Fran? I’m having an important discussion with Neme right now.”

“Don’t look so scary, Arcie. Do I need a reason to come visit an old friend? It’s almost like a mini class reunion.”

“Save the nostalgia for later. I’m busy right now.”

“There might not *be* a later. Neme’s friends are already here. We won’t be able to talk if she goes away again.” Fran continued smiling cheerfully under Arcia’s stern glare.

Arcia folded her arms in irritation. “That’s why I’m watching her so that she doesn’t escape. Don’t get in my way.”

“Sorry. One of the reasons I’m here is to bust Neme out, after all.”

“Wuh?” Neme was taken aback by this news.

Arcia zeroed in on it too. “Do you realize what you’re saying? That would mean opposing both the acting saint and Cardinal Fuge.”

“Well, I’m the pope’s granddaughter. I’m sure Gramps will overlook a little selfishness on my part if I ask him nicely.”

“That’s right... You were the irregular saint candidate left in the church’s care despite being the pope’s grandchild.”

“Honestly, this won’t be my first time helping her escape either.”

“So it was you. Neme couldn’t have fled the church alone, so I always knew she had an accomplice,” Arcia muttered. She then turned to Neme. “How could you forget the benefactor who helped you leave Visril?”

“No comment.”

Back then, Neme had been so preoccupied with Saint’s Authority and Arcia that nearly everything else was a blur. The fact that her memories of Fran from before then were fuzzy too...was a matter to be addressed a different time.

“As for you, Fran, why would you again help the ingrate who forgot about you?”

“Hmm, I wonder. If I had to say, I guess it’s because I’m a fan of Neme’s.”

“You’re a ‘fan’ of someone who puts in no effort, achieves sainthood by pure luck, then runs away from it without fulfilling her duty?”

Harsh as it was, Arcia was right on the mark. Neme had never demonstrated any drive to become the saint. She’d simply acquired the skill by chance. There was nothing admirable about it, and Neme knew that as well as anyone.

“So you really don’t believe that Neme’s worthy of Saint’s Authority, Arcie?”

“Well, no. Why would I? She’s greedy and lazy before all else, the polar opposite of what the saint should be.”

“I disagree. I think Neme was the most suitable candidate in the whole church.”

“Huh?” Neme gasped. She was shocked by Fran’s claim, not to mention confused.

Fran smiled and replied, “Arcie and the others at the church couldn’t see it in you, even though you were the most worthy among us. But, hey, at least God got it right, yeah?”

“Neme was the most worthy...?” Arcia asked in disbelief.

“That’s right.”

“On what basis?”

“I witnessed it myself the night before the presentation ceremony. I left something in the worship hall during my final prayer, and when I went back to get it, Neme was there doing hers.”

“So what?”

“What do you think Neme prayed for?” Fran asked.

Arcia paused for a moment. “Didn’t she ask for more desserts like always?”

“No. She prayed, ‘Please give Arcia the skill to become the saint.’”

“What...?” Surprise filled Arcia’s face.

Fran continued on, paying her no mind. “In contrast, what did we all pray for? Probably something along the lines of, ‘Please make me the saint tomorrow.’ Isn’t that right?”

“That’s...”

“When I heard her prayer, I realized that the rest of us weren’t cut out for sainthood. That Neme would get the skill. How couldn’t she after that? We prayed for ourselves, while Neme was the only one who earnestly prayed for someone else.”

“But she always prayed for desserts before that! Isn’t that just praying for herself too?!”

“Maybe. But what’s so wrong about wishing for a full stomach?” Fran pointed out. “The rest of us prayed for world peace, but what does that even really mean? Did you ever think about that? Is it a world without war? Without sadness? Weren’t those just distant abstractions to us? As saint candidates, we knew nothing of war or sadness. We just prayed how the sisters told us to. They were wishes of no substance.”

“That may be true, but—”

“In that regard, Neme’s wishes were simple, wouldn’t you agree? ‘Please let me eat until I’m full tomorrow.’ Isn’t that just a prayer for continued daily peace? It’s a lovely thing, and far more real than anything we asked for.” Fran placed a hand against her chest and continued, “Maybe that’s how the first saint lived. Maybe she wasn’t trying to eradicate war. Maybe she just wanted enough to eat. Maybe that modest wish is how she truly brought peace to Aifan.”

“You think Neme’s a worthy saint...?” Neme muttered.

The tiny priestess had never dreamed anyone would say that about her. She’d never even believed it about herself. She’d given up on the idea long, long ago. In truth, every time the nuns at the church had told her that she’d never be the saint, it had hurt her. It was like her existence was being denied. So to hear Fran say she was worthy now affirmed everything for Neme. She began to tear up.

“I didn’t think...I’d ever hear that...”

“Some of us know the truth,” said Fran. “Maybe not Arcie, but I do. You didn’t run away from the sainthood. You went into the dungeon in order to find God and protest Arcie’s skill, didn’t you? That’s what you told me when I helped you leave the church.”

“Why...would you...?” Arcia shook her head in disbelief. “I didn’t ask for any of that! And Neme, you said you didn’t want to risk your life as an adventurer!”

“But Neme believes Arcia should be the saint! So when Neme meets God, I’m going to make sure you get the skill!”

“Are you a fool...?” Before she knew it, Arcia’s own voice had gone nasally. Neme couldn’t see her expression through her tears, though. “I’m the one who isn’t worthy of being the saint! I was jealous of my friend getting the skill I wanted! I’m terrible!”

“That’s not true! You were always so nice to me!”

“That’s all in the past... The sweet Arcia you loved is gone now.” Arcia sat down on the floor, her tears showering the red carpet beneath her. “I don’t deserve such kindness from you!”

“That’s not true! Neme still loves Arcia even now!”

“Stop it! Don’t make me any more pitiful than this...” Arcia sobbed.

Though they’d lived together for ten years, Neme had never once seen Arcia explode like this. She wasn’t sure whether she should approach or keep her distance.

Fran stepped in instead, saying, “You haven’t changed at all, Neme, but Arcia and I are different now. We’re sullied adults. You’d never know we were once saint candidates.”

“That can’t be...”

“It is. We’re only human, and it becomes harder for us to accept our mistakes as we grow older. The more time passes, the more stubborn we get. Just look at Arcie.”

Neme turned to her friend, who was still hanging her head. Arcia’s gaze was fixed on her knees. She made no attempt at eye contact.

“But if we take our time from here, I know we can make up for our mistakes. Once we do, let’s meet again. Just the three of us, like a mini class reunion. We can laugh over how foolish we were when we were younger. How about it? Doesn’t that sound fun?”

“Fran...”

How hadn’t Neme noticed that she had such a good friend by her side? Would there truly come a day they could laugh about the folly of their youths? If that was possible, it was a future she would welcome with open arms.

“I’m not the only one who sees you for who you are anymore, right, Neme? You have friends who came to rescue you in spite of the dangers.”

Neme nodded silently. Fran smiled.

“In that case, you shouldn’t be dawdling here. You have no intention of walking away from the dungeon, right?”

“Right!”

There was no hesitation in her answer. It was true that Neme had originally set out to find God and change her skill, but Neme now had plenty more motivating her. There were the current Arrivers. There was also Jin, whose dream had been cut short. There was even the Ultimate Invincible Partyz, whose dreams Neme had promised to carry. Her life now revolved around so much more than just the sainthood. The story of Neme Pargin, adventurer and dungeoneer, was truly just beginning.

“But will you let me go? Can Neme leave?” Neme looked at Arcia nervously.

She nodded weakly. “Just...do what you want... I can’t see anything right now...”

“Arcia...”

Neme could only watch helplessly as her friend curled up into a ball.

Afterward

It was a clear day without a cloud in the sky when the Arrivers returned to Puriff. Naturally, a young-looking priestess was with us. We'd successfully retrieved Neme.

Following my battle with Suiz, I'd found myself unable to sneak past cathedral security alone. I was camped out in an empty room waiting for my chance to move when the earthquake struck, casting the church into chaos. The guards scattered and Neme managed to get out of her room, so we were able to meet up. It wasn't too hard to find Roslia and Sofie after that.

The earthquake was apparently caused by Roslia activating the core of the fortress. Sure, I'd asked her to create a diversion. Never did I expect her to send the whole church into a panic, though. Nevertheless, thanks to that, the four of us were able to rendezvous safely via the hidden passageways that opened up amidst the confusion. I'd then activated Gate to get us out of the city, just like that. I hadn't detected any pursuers during our journey back to Puriff either.

From what information we'd gathered along the way, Visril was so preoccupied with the reactivated fortress that they didn't have time to be concerned about anything else. Visril's fortress was a relic left to them by their national hero—and its revival after centuries was cause for celebration. The citizens we'd met on the road home were all overjoyed. Market streets and bars alike were abuzz with cheer. The entire nation was in a festive mood. With things like this, Aifan would probably be at peace even without a saint.

"Still, why am I a wanted woman now...?" Roslia mumbled. She was sitting on the living room sofa, a newspaper we'd obtained on the journey home open in her hands. I peeked over her shoulder and saw her name written in a small corner of the page.

"Because you went and caused all that trouble," Sofie said, glaring.

"You mean reactivating the fortress? Visril is celebrating because of that! They should be singing my praises, not trying to arrest me!"

“And what about me? I’m also on the wanted list because of you. How am I supposed to explain this to Princess Leyfa...?”

“Don’t you worry. I’m sure your princess will sort things out!”

“You expect Her Highness to renegotiate our arrests? I’m going to tell her not to bother with yours.”

“How heartless can you be?!”

When I laughed at Roslia and Sofie’s banter, the latter shot a sharp glare my way.

“Why are you laughing, Note? You snuck into the church too. Why aren’t you on the wanted list?”

“Because I wasn’t involved in whatever Roslia did...?”

“That’s outrageous. I’m going to ask Her Highness to petition for your arrest instead.”

“Hey, don’t sell out your comrades.”

Sofie was apparently most unhappy about being caught up in Roslia’s mess. I’d thought someone serious like her would be able to keep Roslia under control, but Roslia’s recklessness exceeded my expectations.

Force took one look at Sofie’s exasperation and said, “Looks like sticking with Erin was a good call.”

“You got even with Cardinal Fuge, didn’t you?” I asked.

“Yup. Beat him up good this time,” he replied.

According to the story, Force had had his revenge for the humiliation he’d suffered in the raid on HQ. Cardinal Fuge, the man who’d won over Suiz, was a wily one. He’d cleverly gone after Erin, the keystone of our plan, but he’d underestimated Force’s strength in a critical moment and paid the price for it.

“Now we can finally get back in the dungeon,” Force said, clapping his hands together.

Erin interrupted him. “No, not yet. What are you going to do about your broken sword?”

“Oh, yeah... I forgot about that. This whole thing with Neme distracted me.”

“How could you forget about that?!”

“Well, I guess I can just look for a new one while we’re diving.”

There were plenty of treasures yet to be discovered within the dungeon. If we took our time, we’d surely be able to find a good blade for Force. We had a lot on our plates right now, but that was one problem that should naturally resolve itself eventually. As for the immediate...

Her first time back at HQ in over a month, Neme entered the room with a bow.

“Everyone, thank you for saving me. Thanks to that, we can go back to clearing the dungeon.”

“It’s only natural, isn’t it? If a party member’s in need, we’ll help ‘em out,” Force replied first.

Erin followed up, “We can’t go dungeon diving without you anyway.”

“We all know you’re the most passionate about the dungeon,” I said.

Roslia continued after me in a proud tone, “You could thank me a little more for my role in the rescue, you know? I accept gratitude in all forms.”

“Read the room, Roslia,” scolded Sofie. “And show a little more humility.”

It was nice having Roslia around to brighten a solemn mood, but it was nicer having Sofie around to stop her when she went too far.

“I’m also glad to have you back, Neme.”

“Thank you, Sofie.” Neme bowed once again, looking at everyone in turn as she said, “In the past, I said I wanted to conquer the dungeon to meet God.”

“I remember that,” I said.

“But I don’t believe I need to meet God anymore now.”

“What?! Does that mean you’re quitting?!” Erin shouted.

Her reaction was so in-your-face that Neme let out a strained laugh. “You’re jumping to conclusions. Please just hear me out.”

“That’s not where this was going...?”

“What about Neme’s expression right now made you think that? Maybe you should focus on training your skills of perception, Erin,” chided Roslia.

“Huh? Am I that insensitive?”

Erin looked around the room, and almost everyone nodded. There was one knight in a maid outfit who just looked confused, but let’s leave her be for now.

“So what *were* you saying, Neme?” Erin cleared her throat awkwardly.

Neme clenched her tiny fists. “I want to continue dungeon diving! I want to see our dream come true, and I want to know what’s waiting at the end of the dungeon!”

“Same goes for me.” Force echoed the sentiment. “I originally said I wanted to clear the dungeon to be popular with women, but I honestly don’t care about that anymore. I just want to keep adventuring with you guys and see Jin’s dream realized.”

“Never thought I’d live to hear that come out of your mouth, Force...” I muttered.

“Hey, listen, ladies have been chatting me up on the street recently. I think I’m actually way more popular when I keep quiet, man.”

“Except you ruined it by opening your mouth just now...”

That part of him *hadn’t* changed. I guess it’s not that easy for people to change who they are deep down.

Leaning against the wall, Erin spoke up next. “I don’t care about being the top mage anymore either. I get how Neme feels.”

Roslia tapped a finger against her lips and asked, “So why are you sticking with dungeoneering?”

“Why...? I wonder.”

“You don’t even know?” Roslia tugged on my sleeve. “Look, Note! We’ve got an unmotivated party member on our hands! People like her are bad for morale, so let’s give her the boot ASAP!”

“Why are you trying to get rid of *me*?! If anything, we should get rid of the partywrecker who’s always trying to kick someone else out the drop of a hat!”

“Hic, thanks for everything until now, Erin. I’ll never forget you... Sniffle...”

“Stop it with the obvious crocodile tears! I’m not leaving, even with a touching send-off!”

At the end of the day, Erin and Roslia hadn’t changed much since they’d first met either. Were they on good terms or not? Probably the latter, but at this point, the Arrivers just wouldn’t feel the same without their bickering.

“I could ask the same of you, though. Why are *you* continuing with dungeon diving?” Erin shot at Roslia.

“Obviously, to be with Note,” she replied, hugging me from the side. A soft, warm sensation pressed against my arm.

“That’s so unfair! I wanted to be the one to say that!” Erin shouted.

“Too late. Early bird gets the worm.”

“Grr...”

“Still, that isn’t the only reason anymore,” Roslia said. “It’s fun hitting the dungeon with everyone.”

I hadn’t expected that. In spite of the way Roslia carried on, it seemed she really treasured her time with the Arrivers.

“I am also here, not for Princess Leyfa, but for myself. I want to keep living that way. I’d like to show my gratitude to the Arrivers.”

“So says the knight. Now, what about you, Note?” Roslia asked, tightening her embrace around my arm.

I stopped to think. What *was* my reason for clearing the dungeon? I’d originally joined Arrivers to change myself, to grow out of being someone that I hated. And I wasn’t that guy anymore. So if I still wanted to keep going anyway...that had to mean I was enjoying it. The dungeon was scary, painful, and dangerous, but I cherished every minute I spent exploring it with this party from the bottom of my heart.

“I guess it’s because I love dungeon diving.”

“Just the answer I expected from you, Note...”

We’d all strayed from our original motivations, but the Arrivers’ collective goal was still the same—conquering the heretofore unknown depths of the dungeon. And to that end, for the sake of that dream, we’d keep coming together, stronger every time.

What awaited us on the next floor? My heart raced at the very thought. I couldn’t wait to find out.



Afterword

Long time no see, everyone. Udon Kamono here. It's been nine months since the last volume, so I changed up my salutation to reflect that. I'm very sorry for the wait. As I mentioned last time, these afterwords have been following the light novel production process, and I'd like to keep going with that.

When publishing a light novel, the author normally receives complimentary copies of the final product. The exact number varies from publisher to publisher, but for Overlap Bunko, it's ten. Indeed, I receive ten copies! Supposing I keep a copy for myself, that leaves nine more. I've never told my family that I'm writing this series, and none of my friends know I'm a light novel author. In other words, I have nine spare copies. What should I do with them? I have nine for each volume that's been published. They've taken over the space in the top of my closet, leaving me no room for storage. If anyone reading this decides to become a light novel author, I recommend you make nine friends you can share your work with.

Next, the acknowledgments. To Shizuki the illustrator, thank you for another volume of beautiful and captivating artwork. The cover with all of the Arrivers, the opening image of the heated battle, the opening image of the majestic prayer scene, and the ten insert illustrations were all wonderful. To Editor Soyama, I'm sorry for being so late with my deadline this time. As a light novel author always aiming to be punctual, I felt very bad about this.

Lastly, to my readers, *Mapping: The Trash-Tier Skill That Got Me Into a Top-Tier Party* will be ending with this volume. I am full of gratitude for those of you who've followed it across all eight volumes. This story has had a huge influence on my life. While this is my debut work, it's also a product of the emotions and actions of the characters that move outside of my control. The words come from so deep within me that it's hard to believe it's my own creation.

I've received courage from all kinds of sources, sometimes being hurt in the process. It's been a long four years since I started writing. I've only gotten this

far thanks to everyone's support. Thank you all so much.

This will be farewell to most of you reading this, but for those interested, *Shujinkō ni Narenai Bokura no Dakyō Kara Hajimeru Koibito Seikatsu* from Overlap Bunko will be going on sale the same day as this. If you're interested in another story written by me, please check it out. It's a school romcom, so there naturally won't be any battle scenes, but there'll be some other Kamono-esque developments and a side of me that just might surprise you.

Anyway, that's all for now. Let's meet again somewhere.

-Udon Kamono



Mapping:

The Trash-Tier Skill

That Got Me Into a

Top-Tier Party

Ill. Hitomi Shizuki

8

Udon Kamono





Bonus Short Stories

Encounter with the Tyrant(?) Princess

Off from dungeon diving for the day, I was wandering around town one sunny afternoon when I bumped into someone unexpected.

“Why, if it isn’t Note Athlon,” she hailed.

“Princess Leyfa?! Ugh...” I groaned.

Yup. Standing at the market corner was the notorious princess who’d once picked a fight with the Arrivers—Leyfa Southerndall herself. She wasn’t in her typical black dress, but rather a casual cardigan and skinny jeans. Her long, wavy hair was also tied back. I’d never seen *that* before.

“That’s a rude way to greet someone, don’t you think? If it were anyone else, I’d have them arrested for lèse-majesté.”

I’d accidentally let my inner thoughts slip out upon this disastrous encounter on my rare day off, but I somehow managed to collect myself. “No, you just looked so different from usual—”

“Do you really think I’d go walking around in public dressed like royalty?”

“On that note, I see you’re on your own today.” I’d never seen her alone before either. Leyfa was normally with Sofie or the members of the Legion, so that was surprising as well. In fact, seeing her outside of her hotel or the dungeon was a rare sight. “What are you up to today?”

“Just some shopping,” she said, pointing at the closest store. The sign out front indicated it was a handicraft shop.

“What are you shopping here for?” I inquired.

“What else? I’m here to buy knitting and needlework supplies.”

“Wait... You mean you knit and sew?”

“As a hobby.”

“You’re kidding, right?!”

That Tyrant Princess liked knitting and sewing?! That was the surprise of the century.

“So you make, like, scarves and gloves and stuff?” I asked incredulously.

“I can,” she replied. “I’ve even made stuffed animals.”

“Just hearing you say ‘stuffed animals’ feels off... Are you some kind of imposter Princess Leyfa?”

“That’s the second count of lèse-majesté.”

I was really racking up a rap sheet, but I couldn’t help myself! I just couldn’t imagine Leyfa stitching together a stuffed animal. Anyone else would be facing the same charges. It was a crying shame I didn’t have anyone to share this absolutely shocking discovery with.

“If you don’t believe me, here,” she said, reaching into the item bag at her waist and pulling out a dark red scarf.

“You made this?” I asked, taking it when she held it out to me.

Unlike the plain scarves normally sold in shops, this one had a geometric design carefully stitched into it. An item this well crafted wasn’t something you could just make on a whim after picking up a hobby... What astounding skill.

“I won’t use it, so you can have it,” she offered.

“Uh... Thanks...”

In a strange turn of events, the Tyrant Princess had just given me a handmade scarf. I was pleased with the gift... But the gifter? That part left me feeling kinda conflicted. Could I really wear it on a daily basis?

“We’re blocking foot traffic talking here, so let’s go inside,” she urged.

“Right...”

Wait, why am I going along with this?

I wanted to get out of there before I opened my big mouth again, but I

couldn't refuse her now. I felt pretty awkward about it, but I guess Leyfa didn't. She paid me no mind as she leisurely began browsing the store.

Unable to bear the silence, I asked, "Does Sofie know about this hobby of yours?"

She answered while flipping through the fabrics hanging on the wall, "She does. It's not like it's a secret."

"Guess that's why you had no problem telling me."

"Indeed. I imagine my party members have picked up on it by now too."

"Then you didn't need to come alone, did you? Why not bring Miya as a bodyguard?"

"Why should I have to spend any more time with her...?" Leyfa grimaced. "She causes enough stress for me as is. I don't want her wedging herself into my private life too."

"Savage..."

"You're her childhood friend, aren't you? I'm impressed you withstood her all those years, even at a young age. You have my respect for that."

"I never thought of it that way..." I'd always been happy with Miya, so I wasn't really sure how to respond to that. "I guess, uh, you two don't get along, huh?"

"Hardly. I regret choosing her for her abilities."

I forced a smile and a dry laugh.

Leyfa then asked, "How about your side? Is Sofie doing well?"

"You want to know about Sofie?"

"Yes. She isn't causing any trouble for the Arrivers, is she?"

"Not at all. She's a great help."

"That's good."

Considering that Leyfa had strictly seen Sofie as a pawn before, it was nice to see her show some heart. It was a change that only came about recently.

"You've mellowed out a lot yourself, Princess Leyfa."

“Have I?”

“You were ice cold when we first met, so it’s kind of crazy to think we can chat like this now.”

“I suppose. I also find it quite strange,” she remarked, her eyes never leaving the various fabrics on display.

As I watched her go about her shopping on her own day off, I started to wonder if she might actually be a decent person.

Bath Time with Roslia and Sofie

The day the Arrivers reached Visril for Operation Get Neme Back...

I, Roslia Minkgott, was with the rest of the Arrivers at our hotel after we’d recruited the help of Suiz Myran. The journey to Aifan’s capital had been a long one, and Note had used Enemy Search to discover that Neme was safe for the time being, so I was taking a much-needed load off. Constantly being on edge was just draining, so I invited Sofie to take a relaxing soak with me in the large hotel bath. Nothing like getting naked to get to know someone, you know! I stripped off all my clothes in the changing room, and we got into the water together.

“Wow, it’s so spacious.”

“Yeah. And the place is all ours. How lucky.”

It was nowhere as big as the one in the palace where I used to live, of course, but it was certainly sizable for a hotel. It was worth picking a slightly pricier place just for this.

“A bath this big reminds me of my days in the castle,” Sofie sighed.

“I feel that,” I replied.

“Huh? You do, Roslia?”

She had said exactly what was on my mind, so I’d unconsciously agreed. See, the fact that I used to be a princess was a secret. None of the Arrivers knew.

Teehee! As for Sofie, she was a former retainer to Princess Leyfa, so she had some similar experiences and often mentioned things I could totally relate with—hence these frequent little slips of the tongue.

“Don’t worry about it,” I assured her. “Anyway, you’ve taken a bath in a castle before, Sofie?”

“I regularly joined Princess Leyfa as her attendant.”

“I see.”

“I got quite good at washing her back and shampooing her hair. How about it, Roslia? Care to test my skills?”

“You want to bathe me? Are you sure?”

“Of course. I can guarantee the best bath experience,” she declared with clenched fists and a smug smile on her face.

Was she *always* like this? Just how confident was she? Well, if she was offering an amazing bath experience, who was I to refuse? I was used to maids helping me bathe from my days at the palace, so I wasn’t particularly fussed about the idea.

“Just sit right here,” she beckoned.

I lowered myself onto the stool she had patted. Sofie then put her hand to the shower head to make sure the water was an adequate temperature before casting it on me from the feet up.

“I can see you’ve mastered the basics,” I said. “There are some novices who would use the cold water that comes out at the start.”

“I know. I’ve showered Her Highness with cold water several times—and nearly paid for it with my life.”

“So you’ve done that before, huh?”

Leyfa suddenly seemed a lot more relatable. A pompous princess getting cold water dumped on her... Just imagining that was enough to make a smile tug at the corners of my lips.

“Well, get this. The last time we stayed at a hotel, I poured cold water on Erin

in the bath as a joke and she got super mad.”

“Why would you pull a joke that makes her mad?”

“Because she has *the best* reactions.”

“Is that why Erin said no when you invited her to come along?”

“Probably not. She was way angrier that one time I secretly cast a spell to keep the bubbles from washing out of her hair.”

“Are you an idiot?”

That was such a masterpiece. Erin had gone at it for three whole minutes before turning to me and asking, “*Hey, Roslia, doesn’t this shampoo lather a little too well?*” I nearly busted a gut laughing.

“I’m going to wet your hair now,” said Sofie. “Close your eyes, please.”

“All right. Please don’t cast the endless shampoo spell on me.”

“I’m not you. I wouldn’t do such a thing.”

“I’m serious. Don’t you do it.”

“Do you want me to or something...?”

Despite asking that, Sofie began diligently washing my hair. After wetting it completely, she got some shampoo and massaged my locks from tip to root. She showed special care when she got to my scalp, using the perfect amount of strength—not so hard as to hurt, but not so gentle as to tickle. I’d been prepared to give her a bad review, but I now had to change my tune. It felt great.

“I’m done with your hair. Moving on...”

With that, Sofie began washing every inch of my body. I’d give her service full marks. Never had I imagined that I’d get the princess treatment again after joining the Arrivers.

“Thank you, Sofie. That was the best. I’m pretty jealous that Princess Leyfa got to enjoy that every day.”

“I’m glad you were satisfied. I’ve never bathed anyone but Princess Leyfa either, so it was an enlightening experience.”

“Really? Was there something different about giving me a bath?”

“The length of your hair, for one thing...”

“For *one* thing?”

After a pause, Sofie continued, “The size of your breasts too.”

“*That’s* what you meant?!”

“Princess Leyfa’s are small. She’s an A cup, after all.”

“You just go around revealing her bust size like that?!”

“She never said I couldn’t, so I think it’s fine.”

“Of course not. She probably never expected it to come up this way...”

The poor princess had just been dealt a mighty blow. Luckily for her, I was the only one around to hear that bombshell. Who knew what would have happened if anyone else got their hands on this information? Erin in particular would probably be thrilled to have a comrade.

“Maybe I’m not that jealous of the princess after all...”

I had to revise my earlier statement after Leyfa’s former retainer turned on her like that.

Erin and Miya’s Friendly Shopping Trip!

It was my day off from the dungeon and I, Erin Fortlord, had a date with Note’s childhood friend Miya. Our friendship had grown out of a recent misunderstanding from when we went to raid her place. Said misunderstanding had never been cleared up, so here I was... I couldn’t say I was thrilled, but the fault was mine for not being able to say no firmly. I didn’t want to stand her up either, so I reluctantly trudged toward our agreed meet-up spot.

“Hiya, Erin! Over here!” When I arrived at the fountain, a girl ran up to me waving her hand—Miya.

“Did I keep you waiting?” I asked.

“Not at all. I was just so excited that I came early. Don’t worry about it!”

“Right...”

Apparently I was the only one dreading this. The half-elf grabbed my hands and excitedly jumped up and down, her eyes sparkling.

“I wanted to invite you out sooner, but the Princess’s Legion has been so busy that I couldn’t find the time. I’m sorry,” she gushed.

“That’s fine... I’m not upset about a little delay.”

“Aww, thanks! You’re so nice, Erin!”

I *meant* that I would’ve preferred to defer this for eternity, but this girl apparently couldn’t read between the lines. In fact, this was the first time anyone had ever called me nice.

How stupid can she be? I’m not nice...

“So, what are we going to do?” I asked. “Where are we hanging out?”

“It’s just us girls, so let’s go shopping and have lunch! Or is there something else you wanna do?”

“It’s up to you. I’m fine with that.”

“Then let’s go find some cute clothes!” Miya cheered, throwing her arms in the air while still holding my hand.

Ouch! Hey, mind your brute strength. You’ll dislocate my shoulder like that.

Since we’d decided to do some shopping, we made for a boutique in town.

“Say, you should show me to your favorite clothing store. You know this town inside and out, don’t you?”

“You could say that...”

Sure, I’d been living in Puriff for longer than she had, but I didn’t really care about fashion. I honestly wouldn’t even know what stores to recommend. Still, I didn’t want to seem like a rube, so I pointed to the first place that came into view.

“Come to think of it, I go to that store a lot. They sell lots of cute clothes.”

“It says ‘Aroma Shop Marina.’ Are you sure they sell clothes?”

“Huh?!” I’d assumed the cute exterior meant it was a fashionable clothier, but apparently it was a shop for aromatic oils. I cleared my throat and tried to save face. “No. The store next to it.”

“Oh, that clothing shop.”

“Yes. You’re so silly, Miya.”

“Heh! If you say so, Erin, I can’t deny it. You’re always right.”

Except I’m the person who just mistook an aroma shop for a clothing boutique. What makes you think I’m so trustworthy?

“Shall we go in?” I asked.

“Sure! Say, if this is your favorite store, do you come here a lot?” she asked in turn.

“Yeah. You could say I’m a regular.”

“Wow, that’s so cool! How often do you come?”

“About once a week?”

“Huh?! That often?!”

With no idea how often one normally shops for clothes, I ended up giving Miya an answer that shocked her.

“Let’s go in already,” I insisted, ushering us inside the store before she could ask anything else.

If I had to describe the atmosphere in one word, it would be sophisticated. The floor was covered in a deep crimson carpet, and there were mannequins wearing dresses everywhere. A formally dressed attendant appeared from the back of the shop to greet us.

“Welcome. Oh, I’ve never seen you two here before. Is this your first visit?”

“Huh? Aren’t you a regular—”

“When you’re a regular like me, you become too familiar to remember.”

“I see!”

Really...?

Even I knew that excuse was a stretch, yet Miya seemed to accept it. I was grateful but baffled. Why she was so quick to believe me was an absolute mystery.

“Our store specializes in dresses,” said the clerk. “We’re particular about our materials and designs, so we can promise you the finest gowns in Puriff. Feel free to take a look around.”

Oh no, I’d totally picked the wrong boutique. I was starting to regret pretending I was a regular at a random shop. Yet somehow, Miya still hadn’t caught on to my lie. Her eyes were aglitter in awe.

“Wow, Erin! You get your clothes from here?”

Seriously, isn’t it about time you figured it out? Who buys gowns once a week? I’m not some noble. I’ve never even worn a proper gown before!

“Go figure...”

When I looked at the tag on the closest dress, the price was staggering for a piece of clothing. It was two zeros longer than the cost of anything I normally wore.

“Ah! This one’s cute! Let’s try it on!”

“Huh?!”

How can she be so handsy with such a classy dress? Does she fear nothing? If we accidentally damage it, that mistake is really going to cost you...

“You shouldn’t really grab anything out of your price range—”

“It’s fine! I might not be as rich as you, but Leyfa pays the Princess’s Legion pretty well.”

“Really? You’re not saying that just to meet my level, are you?”

“I’m not! Don’t worry!”

“I can’t help it. How much *do* you make, if I may ask?”

“Psst, psst...”

The number Miya whispered into my ear made me jump—literally.

“G-Get out!”

“Oh, that’s just my monthly salary. I got several times that as a sign-on bonus. I get an extra bonus twice a year too.”

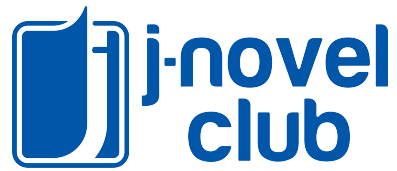
“You get *bonuses*?!”

That was unheard of in the Arrivers. Just how rich was the princess?! The amount she was paying out per month blew my mind. I mean, I knew she was royalty, but still... If she’d offered Note a sum like that, she would’ve had a much easier time without having to kidnap Neme.

“I know! To celebrate us becoming friends, how about we buy dresses for each other today? Doesn’t that sound fun?”

“Ah, that means I have to buy something too...”

Thus, as punishment for my lies, I ended up purchasing an expensive dress I didn’t even want.



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Mapping: The Trash-Tier Skill That Got Me Into a Top-Tier Party: Volume 8

by Udon Kamono

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